

Belarus: Europe's Last Dictator?

INTRODUCTION

Unlike its neighbors to the West, Belarus relapsed into authoritarianism soon after its transition to democracy began and it became an independent state. While a number of post-socialist countries have had troubled transitions after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the USSR in 1991, Belarus remains a special case; deserves the oft-heard appellation “the last dictatorship in Europe.”

Belarus lies on the edge of the former Soviet Union's western frontier, and is predominantly populated by Belarusians – an Eastern Slavic people (along with Russians, Ukrainians and Ruthenians). Situated in the flat “shatter belt” of Eastern Europe, the country has been dominated by stronger regional powers for much of its existence, though it was an integral, even dominant, element of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. While Belarusians are a distinct people, national identity remains an issue.

Soviet Era

Incorporated into the Soviet Union after a brief window of independence after Soviet Russia's separate peace with Germany in 1918, Belarus was split between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1921. Heavy repression and deportations were the norm in the interwar period. In 1939, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, Belarus grew to incorporate ethnically mixed areas (Belarusian/Polish) of what had been eastern Poland.

As a “front line republic,” Byelorussian SSR became in the following decades a center of the Soviet military-industrial complex, as a prosperous showcase center of Soviet heavy industry and high technology engineering.

The explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor just over the southern border in the Ukrainian SSR in April 1986 had a devastating impact on Belarus, where 70% of the fallout fell, particularly in the southern agricultural regions around Homel. Up to 20% of the country is unsuitable for residence or agriculture. The health effects on millions of Belarusians are being assessed and debated to this day.

When Gorbachev launched into his *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) policies in an attempt to reinvigorate the moribund Soviet system, increasing the space for social and political discussion, Belarus' own national reawakening was hobbled more than that of other republics by social dislocation, Sovietization and Russification, although the discovery of mass graves from the Stalin era at Kurapaty in 1988 accelerated these stirrings.

While the electoral law favored the communists (who won 84% of the seats), the March 1990 elections for the Supreme Soviet of Belarus were relatively free. The republic declared sovereignty that July. But it was only after the failed August 1991 coup, and a meeting of Byelorussian SSR Supreme Chair Stanislav Shushkevich with the Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk in December 1991 that dissolved the USSR that Belarus became independent.

Post-Independence Democratic Window – and its Closure

The country faced all the difficulties a “Newly Independent State” might expect: institutions that now had to govern but had been facades for real party power, mis-developed economies, public distrust of government and lack of social capital, etc. Belarus' economy took a heavy hit as producer of finished products for the now nonexistent Soviet market.

The learning curve was steep at the time for all involved – including the democratic countries and international institutions that aimed to assist a democratic transition they had not expected. The international community tended to focus mainly on existing state institutions, large scale economic assistance, Chernobyl relief, and – understandably – getting the nuclear weaponry stationed in Belarus (and Ukraine and Kazakhstan) under central control of Moscow.

Enter Lukashenka...

Belarus' parliament adopted a new constitution with a presidential system in March 1994. In the elections that followed that July, relatively unknown former collective farm director Aliaksandr Lukashenka was elected by a whopping 80% of the vote, winning on a populist platform. He also enjoyed the backing of numerous established and moneyed interests, who assumed he would do their bidding. He constituted a “project” for them.

The following year, independent Belarus elected its first parliament, the 13th Supreme Soviet. Lukashenka did not have a working majority, being able to count on less than a third of the votes. All the same, he began to exhibit the paranoia and bizarre behavior for which he would later earn renown, along with a drive to centralize his control. In September 1995, his armed forces shot down a hot air balloon crossing Belarusian airspace in an international race, killing the American pilot and co-pilot. Pressure also increased on the use of the Belarusian language in this period, following the adoption of Russian as a second state language and the reversal of the state bureaucracy's post-independence transition from Russian to Belarusian.

... Exit Democracy: Lukashenka's Authoritarian Consolidation

Lukashenka moved to systematically marginalize democratic opposition to his rule. His increasingly evident authoritarian bent brought together a strange partnership in the parliament of the Party of Communists of Belarus and economic liberals. Working to head-off impeachment, he developed a clone party, the Communist Party of Belarus, and two others, to siphon support from his adversaries. He held a referendum in November 1996 and then dissolved the parliament, confident that his clone parties, and those he co-opted or divided from within, would allow him to govern comfortably in his new super-presidential system – and not surprisingly succeeded in getting it approved. “By replacing the 13th Supreme Soviet by a Parliamentary Assembly composed of the pro-Lukashenka members of the 13th Supreme Soviet he eliminated the opposition from all state institutions (parliament, Constitutional Court, government, vertical state structure, state-controlled media) and reduced substantially the operational breathing space for the political and social opposition.” “Lukashenka had set up a system more akin to the ‘regime parties’ of the old East Germany.” His use of “administrative resources” – the machinery of state, including the security services (the KGB retains its title to this day), enforced the consolidation of power. Public institutions merely became fronts for essentially unlimited executive power, and elections were fixed to a point that was Soviet in the method of shameless execution. According to Wilson, by “denying any normal space for meaningful contest...public politics since 1996 has often been little more than shadow-boxing.”

Pressure on independent factors of public life – independent broadcasters and publications, academic freedom in educational institutions, civic associations, minority religious congregations, etc. – became increasingly acute in the late 1990s. Opposition figures began to fear assassination or being “disappeared” – a fate that met some former regime officials, former Interior Minister Yury Zahkharanka and Vice Speaker of the Parliament Viktor Hanchar who began to develop plans to oust Lukashenka. One opposition leader, Hienadz Karpenka, died in April 1999 “when a brain hemorrhage was apparently

provoked by coffee-drinking,” according to the official version. Russian ORT network journalist Dzmitry Zavadsky was also “disappeared.”

Helmut Frick, Germany’s Ambassador who arrived in 2001, “expected to see the agony of the old Soviet system. I was somewhat surprised to find how this microcosm was still working. It was quite familiar that all these systems created a façade of an ‘independent press, human rights,’ etc.” Practically speaking, information was rigidly controlled. The same Potemkin freedoms held true for civil society, according to Frick. “Some NGOs could exist, but they were unable to meet. Their contracts to rent venues were not allowed. Print houses wouldn’t accept their commissions.” Lukashenka’s was a “softer regime than the GDR or Romania, but (it was) as efficient in suppressing human rights and the opposition tendency.”

Beginning in 1995, Lukashenka began to pursue a union with Russia. His deluded assumption at the time was that he could assume leadership of the Russia-Belarus Union and become the *vozhd* (leader) of the entire territory through direct elections. The succession of Yeltsin by Vladimir Putin soon robbed him of this delusion. But the union ensured continued preferential economic treatment, most importantly on oil and gas, but also in terms of markets for Belarusian goods. As the isolation of Belarus deepened, Lukashenka in turn deepened his relationships with other dictatorships: Milošević’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and China. The union was not without its conveniences for well-connected Russian arms dealers, providing a conduit for illicit arms sales, for which Belarus soon became legendary.

Lukashenka’s authoritarian grip tightened through this decade, with a series of faux elections: parliamentary in 2000 and 2004 (along with a referendum to allow a third presidential term), and presidential in 2001 and 2006. He ensured his victories in each with the application of his media dominance (which by now is nearly total, save the Internet, which he aims to control soon), intimidation and harassment of the opposition, and the always useful organs of the state – the so-called “administrative resources.”

By the presidential elections of March 19, 2006, the opposition applied lessons learned from other cases, particularly the Orange Revolution that had occurred next door in Ukraine just over a year before – and which was witnessed in person by many in the Belarusian opposition. These were opposition unity, non-violent discipline, and popular concentration in visible public space while awaiting electoral results, among others. Two opposition challengers, Dr. Aliaksandr Milinkevich and Professor Aliaksandr Kazulin, ran against Lukashenka. But the regime was closing the remaining public space by deregistering and harassing NGOs, for example, and criminalizing assistance to them from abroad. Meanwhile, a crowd of opposition supporters numbering in the thousands assembled in downtown Minsk and prepared to camp out to protest the unfair election results. But the square was ultimately cleared after four days with 400 arrests on the night of camp’s dispersal. Overall, about 1,000 activists were imprisoned during the presidential campaign 2006. A later march to a prison to demand the release of political prisoners, led by Aliaksandr Kazulin, led to the violent assault on him and a number of others. He was imprisoned for “hooliganism” until August 2008. Scores of peaceful demonstrators were violently assaulted and arrested by the regime at a demonstration to mark the 90th anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic. In June 2008, the parliament passed a media law that restricts online reporting. The civil society remains under tight grip of the regime since the criminal code imposes heavy penalties for running nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) without official registration.

Since mid-2008, Belarusian civic advocates both in the country and outside have noted a reduction of pressure by the Lukashenka regime. In August 2008, former presidential candidate Aliaksandr Kazulin, along with two other dissidents, Andrej Kim and Sergei Parsyukevich, was released from jail. The removal of some of the most repressive figures of the regime’s power bloc, such as Security Council Head, Viktor Sheiman, and the commander of the riot police, Dzmitry Paulichenka, a mastermind of

violent crackdowns on civil protests, together with the release of political prisoners and the registration of the opposition movement “For Freedom!” signaled the softening of Lukashenka’s regime and the willingness to abandon some hard-line practices. In an unprecedented move, the three independent media outlets – *Narodnaya Volya*, *Nasha Niva* and *Uzgorak* – were allowed to be published in Belarus and were included in the state distribution network.

The September 2008 parliamentary elections, not surprisingly, resulted in a sweep by government candidates. All 110 seats in the House of Representatives were occupied by pro-government candidates. While the OSCE-ODIHR Election Observation Mission stated that the process “ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections,” but that “there were some minor improvements, which could indicate a step forward.” Despite lack of significant improvement in the electoral process, the European Union (EU) maintained its policy of normalizing relations with Belarus. Many European officials called for continuing the dialogue with Minsk, a policy illustrated by the visit of then EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, to Minsk and his meeting with President Lukashenka in February 2009.

On April 25, 2010, Belarus failed another test for democratization. On that day, voters went to the polls to elect members of local councils. Although more than 21,000 seats on local councils were contested, only roughly 360 opposition candidates competed, and only a handful won seats. Opposition leaders claimed that elections were marred by numerous falsifications, and condemned the local elections campaign as undemocratic. “As before, there are no elections in the Republic of Belarus,” – they said in a joint statement on April 5. International observers, except diplomats already working at foreign embassies in Minsk, were not invited, which was criticized by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in a resolution at the end of April.

Overall, in the first half of 2010, the situation with human rights and democratic freedoms in Belarus has again deteriorated, which can be ascribed to the forthcoming presidential campaign. The latest possible date of the presidential election is February 6, 2011. In May, mass raids were conducted in the offices of the “Tell the Truth” civic campaign and in apartments belonging to representatives from democratic forces not only in Minsk, but across Belarus. On May 6, Vawkavysk entrepreneurs Mikalay Awtukhowich and his associate Uladzimir Asipenka, were given prison sentences of several years by the Supreme Court of Belarus for the illegal handling of weapons. Since the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus is the court of the first instance and its verdicts take effect on their announcement, as provided by the Criminal Process Code, the accused were deprived of their right to appeal. The trial appears politically motivated, as Awtukhowich is known for speaking publicly about alleged corruption in government bodies and promoting the rights of entrepreneurs and of Afghan war veterans (the Belarusian SSR suffered the highest number of casualties per capita of any Soviet republic).

In February, the Union of Poles of Belarus (UPB), an ethnic Polish cultural organization (ethnic Poles constitute about 4% of Belarus's 9.7 million people) headed by Andželika Borys, an unrecognized by the Belarusian authorities, came under legal assault. The UPB was denied registration. The so-called “official” Union of Belarusian Poles led by Stanislau Syamashka, a splinter group from the UPB formed in 2005, is fully backed and recognized by authorities. Since 2005, members of the UPB led by Andželika Borys have been subject to regular harassment and persecution. In February 2010, police seized the Polish House in Iryanets, a small city some 30 miles west of Minsk, forcibly evicting all the UPB activists from the building in favor of the official UPB. In addition, Borys and other activists have been fined, and up to 40 activists have received brief jail sentences in the weeks following the incident. Despite its having been a champion of the Eastern Partnership initiative (see below), Poland lobbied other EU member states to review the EU’s current policy of engagement towards Belarus following this attack on minority rights.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES

The international community's democracies, particularly in Europe and the US, undertook efforts to assist Belarus' independence and democracy in the early 1990s, a period of heady optimism on the part of the established democracies. Much assistance to Belarus at this time focused on securing the nuclear weapons on the country's territory left by the Soviet armed forces and ensuring their shipment to Russia, as well as on treating the health and environmental legacy of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Democracy assistance focused heavily on state institutions, and economic assistance was channeled through the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. There was not much of a civil society to support. International organizations themselves were adapting, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe being formed and NATO constructing the North Atlantic Cooperation Council as an anteroom to enlargement.

Lukashenka's election in mid-1994 did not impede the country's entry into NATO's Partnership for Peace program, open to all post-socialist Eurasian states, in January 1995. This arrangement was not strictly security focused: it also included political undertakings in the same vein as the OSCE's Copenhagen commitments. The policies of the international community began to shift in the mid-1990s, when the Belarusian government veered away from its commitments to democratic practice, observance of human rights and rule of law – particularly the 1996 presidential coup. The EU's institutions and the Council of Europe adopted a number of sanctions as a result: freezing contacts and suspending the ratification procedure for the EU-Belarus Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and PACE Special Guest status for Lukashenka's hand-picked parliament.

In response to the government's undercutting of democracy, the OSCE dispatched in 1997, with the full approval of the Belarusian authorities, an Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) headed by German Ambassador Hans Georg Wiewick. The mission had a very broad mandate to provide advice to both governmental and non-governmental actors in Belarus, and to endeavor to get the government to bring its practices into conformity with the international norms to which it subscribed as an OSCE member – including rule of law and freedom of the media. The AMG was a new tool for democratic states to work directly in a country for the implementation of internationally accepted democratic norms, and it was reaffirmed at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999 by the leaders of all OSCE members, including Belarus' Lukashenka Government.

Yet in the same period, there was a bizarre confrontation between the Belarusian government and the diplomatic community over diplomatic residences at Drazdy in Minsk, in an area that also includes the presidential residence. Officially, the eviction of western diplomats from their residences was for "necessary repairs," and many were physically prevented from reentering, with doors welded shut. There are competing theories of why Lukashenka insisted on it. According to one later serving ambassador, it was simply because "Luka is one of those guys who wants to show you who's boss." Another noted that with his Stalinist mentality, Lukashenka didn't *need* a justification, but it was probably that he didn't want foreign diplomats so close to his home. These former residences are now part of a park around President Lukashenka's residence, "guarded like the East-West frontier – with barbed wire." This crisis led to the withdrawal of these ambassadors from the country – in the case of the European countries for some months, in the case of the US, for well over a year. Eventually a "ridiculous[ly small] sum" was paid in compensation to the German government; the US received some compensation but no official approval for a permanent diplomatic residence.

International pressure for a return to democracy and support for civil society and activist NGOs increased in the run up to the September 9, 2001 presidential elections, as did support for civil society actions like election monitoring, get-out-the-vote campaigns, and assistance to independent media. But just as the

international community began to react to the elections, the attacks in New York and Washington, DC occurred, diverting all international attention and allowing Lukashenka greater breathing space for further repression. During this period, the Belarusian, Russian, and some other CIS governments succeeded in forcing the OSCE to accept that OSCE projects had to be approved by the government. The reduced freedom of action of this “legally installed bridgehead needed to coordinate support for the political and social opposition and...free and fair elections,” meant the end of this unique policy tool.

But assistance to Belarus’ growing civil society continued. In 2004, the US Congress adopted the Belarus Democracy Act, authorizing assistance for democratic forces; in essence augmenting resources for assistance that had already been taking place. The EU published a “non-paper” entitled “What the European Union could bring to Belarus” in November 2006, listing the benefits on offer to the country if the government changed its policies on a host of human rights issues. Today, the Lukashenka government continues to rail against what it claims are unfair western conditions, threatening to play a geopolitical card and draw closer to Russia as a result. In an unprecedented collaboration, domestic and international NGOs mobilized against Belarus’ candidacy for a seat on the new UN Human Rights Council in 2007, leading to the UN General Assembly rejection of its bid in favor of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia for the two European seats.

In May 2008, the Belarusian authorities expelled US Ambassador Karen Stewart and a large complement of diplomats in an effort to cripple democracy support activities, though ostensibly in retaliation for sanctions against the Belneftkhim energy concern. Yet, despite the diplomatic row between Minsk and Washington, the US lifted some sanctions in response to the release of political prisoners.

In May 2009, during the Czech EU Presidency, the EU launched its “Eastern Partnership” initiative with six former Soviet republics, including Belarus (the others being Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The Partnership aims to “accelerate political association and further economic integration” between the EU and these countries. While membership is not a clear prospect, the Partnership is to “facilitat(e) approximation toward the European Union.” In June 2009, then-EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner visited Minsk, promising cooperation on “a wide range of areas of mutual interest.” In a probable reference to Russia, Lukashenka said Belarus was intent on improving relations “no matter whom that displeases.”

The European Parliament urged in its December 2009 resolution on Belarus to give a new impetus to the dialogue between Belarus and the EU through inter-parliamentary cooperation within EURONEST, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Eastern Partnership. The resolution also called on Belarusian authorities to abolish the Criminal Code’s Article 193-1 that criminalizes acting on behalf of an unregistered organization, stop the practice of denying registration to political parties and non-governmental organizations, and create favorable conditions for the operation of NGOs and private media outlets.

The thaw in relations between Minsk and Western democracies is new, and comes at a time when the divide has grown between Minsk and Moscow. Belarus needs foreign investment and loans, as the economy, long a selling point for Lukashenka, is in trouble. The US and EU have made their overtures to the Belarusian government in the hope that these will assist the country’s transition to genuine democracy. It is too early to say whether the easing of pressure on Belarusian civil society is a sign of serious policy shift. Civic activists noted in 2009 that there is “more freedom in the air” and “definitely less repression,” but caution that only the release of the political prisoners is concrete.

In contrast to the hope generated at that time, a recent new wave of repression against civil society in spring 2010 gives little ground for optimism. The regime’s talk of liberalization primarily concerns the economic, not political, sphere. Despite high-level visits like that of former EU foreign policy chief Javier

Solana, pressure is mounting on civil society and any elements of opposition, often through the courts. Though the EU is still willing to make overtures toward Belarus, on May 19, European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek called on Belarusian authorities to immediately desist in its persecution of civil society. Belarusian activists doubt any political opening prior to upcoming presidential elections.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS OF DIPLOMATS IN BELARUS

The democratic diplomatic community in Minsk includes EU members, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria and Romania. The United States also has an Embassy, as do Serbia, Turkey, Georgia, Ukraine, Japan, South Korea, India and Israel. Other democracies cover Belarus from embassies in Moscow, Warsaw, Vilnius, or Kyiv. The European Commission opened in April 2008 its representative office in Minsk (now the Delegation of the EU to Belarus), finally giving it a direct presence on the ground, though thus far it is seen by Belarusians as having had a limited impact. The Delegation's mandate allows it only to assist the government in promoting institution building and developing relations with civil society and to monitor the overall situation. On June 8, 2009, the Council of Europe opened its Information Point in the Belarusian capital, intended to inform Belarusians about Council of Europe activities and convey European values and standards, particularly in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Diplomats on the ground in Minsk use the resources at their disposal, sometimes quite creatively, to assist civic and democratic activists. A wide cross-section of diplomats have employed their diplomatic **immunity** on behalf of dissidents, through visits to them in prisons and other detention facilities.

Minsk-based diplomats could count on the strong **support of home authorities** – more than most diplomats can count on. This backing was manifest in public statements by senior officials. For example, US Ambassador Karen Stewart was able to arrange for an audience with President Bush for a broad group of Belarusian civil society and opposition representatives. The French Ambassador arranged similar high-level meetings with Aliaksandr Milinkevich when he was the main opposition candidate for the 2006 presidential elections, as have the Czechs, Poles and others.

The **influence** of diplomatic missions in Belarus on Lukashenka's policies varies, so coordination among these missions is crucial to maximize their collective access and leverage. Most recently, missions have collaborated to attain the unconditional release of political prisoners, achieving some success — by August 2008 all political prisoners were released, including Aliaksandr Kazulin, though at least 10 activists continued to serve "restricted freedom" sentences that permit them to leave their homes only for work. Diplomats on the ground also convey to their governments whom to target in personal sanctions, for example, to build leverage on the government. These lists have expanded over time to include figures involved in repression, undermining the electoral process, and regime-connected business leaders.

Many embassies and other diplomatic missions also have dedicated embassy **funds** to assist civil society actors in Belarus and Belarusians outside toward promoting democratic values. Most of these funds are channeled through projects that do not require governmental approval, such as scholarships and other support for students who left Belarus fleeing repression or who remain in Belarus but have been expelled for political activism.

Solidarity with Belarusians seeking a freer political system has been a consistent point for the diplomatic community. For example, the OSCE AMG “established a fund for support to families of victims of prosecution, which included legal advice and or legal defense in court.” Belarusian civic and opposition activists note solidarity is best displayed by diplomatic visibility at events.

The international and domestic **legitimacy** of diplomats' efforts to assist those trying to instill democratic practice in Belarus has been a pivotal tool. The fact that Belarus is a member of the OSCE, which entails

the formal and legal embrace of a whole host of democratic norms gives the OSCE mission access to prisoners denied to other diplomats. The wide-ranging OSCE AMG mandate allowed it to facilitate negotiations between the government and opposition in the (vain) hope of ending the deadlock prior to parliamentary and presidential elections.

USING THE DIPLOMATS' TOOLBOX IN BELARUS

Golden Rules

The democratic diplomatic corps in Belarus makes a practice of **listening** to the concerns and positions of civil society and the repressed political opposition, both in frequent meetings and by attending public events. The EU heads of mission conduct regular collective field visits to the regions of Belarus to meet representatives of civil society and local government.

A number of diplomats, such as former US Ambassador George Krol, have made a point of learning to speak in Belarusian for public addresses and interaction with Belarusians, despite – or because of – the efforts by the Lukashenka regime to squeeze Belarusian out of the public square. This conveys **respect** for Belarusians. Swedish diplomat Stefan Ericsson “is very popular in Minsk... (he) speaks Belarusian better than 70% of Belarusians,” according to one Belarusian civil society figure. A senior opposition advisor said that such ability to speak Belarusian “is very important for those with national consciousness.” Ericsson also has translated Belarusian literature into Swedish. Embassies have assisted in getting Belarusian literature translated into English, German, and French to introduce the country to a European audience. To commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic, several senior diplomats took dictation in Belarusian at the Francisak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society in Minsk. In the words of one Belarusian civic activist, the supportive diplomatic role has been “tremendous” while the government has worked to identify use of the Belarusian language with opposition political activity. In 2009, the dictation event was repeated, with ten foreign diplomats participating. Another example of the interest the diplomatic corps demonstrates in Belarusian culture is the rock festival held in 2006 at the US ambassador's residence where 16 rock bands, most of them banned from performing in Belarus, performed for a predominantly Belarusian audience who could see them live nowhere else.

Coordination among diplomatic missions, including strategizing and **sharing** of information, is a stock feature of the Minsk diplomatic corps. The EU heads of missions meet regularly, every Tuesday. Ambassador Frick remembers that the EU had “high standing” with the Belarusian population and was an “attractive brand,” so there is a premium on being seen to act together on the ground. The US has a more fraught relationship with the Belarusian authorities than the EU, so has less access, making coordination all the more important. **Sharing** ensures that trials and events are covered, that recommendations to capitals are in sync, and that regime efforts to divide the democracies – on unconditional release of political prisoners, for example – do not succeed. There is also coordination between the US, EU, and other concerned countries at the capital level and in donor meetings, which take place roughly every two months, usually in Brussels.

This was not always the case. Friction among staffs of diplomatic missions, often generated not only by personality conflicts among the opposition, but also fomented by the Belarusian security services, undermined unity of effort. Prior to the 2001 presidential elections, Ambassadors Kozak and Wieck met to establish a positive working relationship.

Truth in Communications

The regular **reporting** of diplomats from Minsk has conveyed the deepening level of repression through the consolidation of the Lukashenka regime, and has generated targeted policies to leverage more space for free civic activity in Belarus. The OSCE AMG, for example, with its wide mandate, reported regularly to the OSCE Permanent Council on the repression of the regime, including the “disappearance” of regime opponents in the late 1990s and the jailing of many others.

The importance of media dominance to the Lukashenka government is hard to overstate. Most people get their news from television, and that is state-controlled – and often mesmerizingly bizarre in its programming. The print realm is hardly any better. Ambassador Frick recalls that “small newspapers were allowed to appear, but they...couldn’t be distributed throughout the capital – so their messages were kept marginal. The folks outside Minsk didn’t even *know* that there was a different line.” A recent policy paper states that “dissenting voices and media outlets (have been) silenced by repressive media laws and licensing rules, libel suits, arbitrary closure...discriminatory pricing for print and distribution, and systematic harassment of journalists.”

The EU, US and others work to **inform** the Belarusian public through sponsoring or hosting broadcast efforts into Belarus from abroad, especially neighboring countries, including the EU-funded European Radio for Belarus, Polish and Lithuanian Belsat, and US-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. However, due to their being primarily on shortwave frequencies, the listenership of these stations is unfortunately rather low. A breakthrough effort was the launch of the first independent Belarusian TV, Belsat, operating from Poland, on Human Rights Day, December 10, 2007. Although denied the registration in Belarus and accessible only via satellite, this TV channel has a broad network of own correspondents in Belarus and provides independent and unbiased news coverage exclusively in Belarusian language. The TV is funded by Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs with support of US Department of State, the British Embassy and Irish Aid. According to the TV-channel’s statistical data, it is watched by 10-20% of Belarusian people – between one and two million people. Diplomats work around the media blockade to inform the public. *Radio Racyja*, supported by the Polish Government, is broadcast from the Polish border city of Bialystok. The November 2006 EU non-paper “What the European Union could bring to Belarus,” was used by the EU diplomatic missions as a platform for presentations not only in Minsk but country-wide, working around the Lukashenka regime’s control of the broadcast media and severe strictures on print journalism. With the arrival of the EC’s own representation in Minsk, Belarusian civic activists hope that this outreach will grow. Diplomats also convey information materials in and out of Belarus – grant reports, records, magazines, newspapers and other communications.

Ambassador Stewart notes that while Belarusian TV follows all her public appearances, if any of the footage is used, it is never to allow her to speak, but to cast her activities in a negative light. Ambassador Frick made a point of telling the Belarusian media about his visit to hunger striking opposition figures. The existence of the external broadcasting channels, however, provides one method for diplomats to communicate unmediated to a Belarusian audience in a roundabout way.

Diplomats also avail themselves of new media to directly engage the public. British Ambassador Nigel Gould-Davies, who served in Belarus from 2007 to 2009, was an advocate of such direct people-to-people contact. He used an informal, open style of communications with citizens, kept his own blog on the Internet (<http://zubritanets.livejournal.com/>), and often communicated with young activists and bloggers.

Working with the Government

Given the nature of the Lukashenka regime, working with the government is almost always difficult, and often thankless. But Belarus offers two perhaps unique diplomatic examples: the first involving the OSCE AMG under Ambassador Hans Georg Wiecek, the second involving an attempt to construct a roadmap out of isolation by the American Ambassador, Mike Kozak.

The OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group was mandated in 1997 “to ‘assist’ in the establishment of democratic institutions and was duty bound to monitor the complying of Belarus with the OSCE Human Rights and Democracy standards.” **Advising** the government on how to return to democratic practice after its 1996 departure, specifically on “re-introducing OSCE standards into the legislation on parliament, electoral code, media and penal code” was Ambassador Wiecek’s mission. He established separate working groups with the government and opposition, in an effort to achieve concrete progress. The unique mandate and leverage of the mission was brought to a halt in 2002, with the Belarusian authorities denying visa renewal to its international staff in an effort to force the OSCE mission to clear all projects with the government, supported in the OSCE by Russia and others in the CIS. The successor mission was launched in 2003 having agreed to that stipulation.

Ambassador Mike Kozak endeavored to initiate a constructive **dialogue** with the Belarusian authorities soon after he arrived. Lukashenka and his officials complained about the “unfair” sanctions and restrictions that were applied to the regime, and asked how to get rid of them. Ambassador Kozak sat down with then-First Deputy Foreign Minister Martynou and developed a precise roadmap, with actions on one side leading to corresponding reactions on the other. He began the process by asking Martynou to list what specific actions he wanted from the US government, while Kozak made a list of his own, listing actions the US wanted the Belarusian government to take. Kozak recalled “What he wanted was a restoration of (trade privileges) foreign assistance, etc – all in the economic and diplomatic sectors. What I listed was the election commission, a release of political prisoners, media freedom, and an investigation of the disappearances – all in the human rights and democracy columns. Then, we tried to sequence and link these wishes, to determine good faith. It was literally cut and pasted, with scissors and tape.” Unfortunately, though there was broad approval in the Belarusian government for this approach, it was scuppered by the Chairman of the Security Council Viktor Sheiman and Lukashenka himself: “he balked at investigation of some killings.” But the exercise was worthwhile all the same, as “we drove some wedges within the (parts of the regime) that (were) reasonable, and only Luka (Lukashenka) and his close cronies rejected it. It was still worth doing to prove that there was not unremitting, implacable hostility...I traded on this capital for the rest of my time there.” The unconditional release of all political prisoners remains linked to a lifting of certain sanctions and restrictions.

Various EU embassies hold consultations with state administrative bodies, particularly with the Foreign Ministry. In 2007, during its local presidency, Slovakia consulted with the Belarusian MFA’s political directors, consular departments, and international law departments. “The aim of all these activities is not to support the self-isolation of (the) regime, but (rather) to create basic preconditions for future full-fledged dialogue and cooperation” following liberalization, according to Slovak *Chargé d’affaires* Ľubomir Rehak.

Belarusian civil society figures appreciate the value of such dialogues. One notes the utility of contacts with mid-level officials, to illustrate what would be possible for “a different kind of Belarus.” But he adds “such engagement should not come at the expense of civil society, nor should it be detrimental... An increase in engagement should also come with a boost in assistance to civil society.”

In addition, the broader diplomatic community regularly **demarche** the Belarusian authorities on their violation of internationally recognized human rights norms (such as the “disappearance” or imprisonment of opponents), and advised home authorities on which responsible officials, regime associates, and firms should be subject to asset freezes and visa bans. Belarusian opposition figures and independent observers, as well as diplomats, make the connection between concerted diplomatic pressure from ambassadors and the release of a majority of political prisoners. Yet there is some disagreement among some Belarusian analysts on how effective the visa bans and asset freezes are. One opined “they introduce sanctions and Luka runs with these sanctions to Moscow...So, from Luka’s perspective, the US is useful idiot... actually some of them...go on the UN visa (*laissez passer*).” But others are adamant that these sanctions do bite, citing the government’s constant efforts to get them lifted, to the level of public statements by Foreign Minister Martynou, as proof.

Following the release of some high-profile political prisoners (Aliaksandr Kazulin among them) and Lukashenka’s shutout of all opposition from parliament, the government engaged in consultation with the OSCE on media and the election law. The EU has also begun engaging in an official human rights dialogue with the Belarusian government. In October 2008, the EU suspended visa sanctions against most Belarusian officials (except of the head of the country’s CEC and four persons suspected of involvement in the 1999-2000 disappearances of Lukashenka’s opponents) for six months and endorsed dialogue with Belarusian authorities on matters of technical cooperation. In March 2009, the suspension of the sanctions was extended another nine months to encourage the Belarusian government to carry out “further concrete measures towards democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Finally, in November 2009, EU foreign ministers agreed to extend the suspension until October 2010 to encourage further democratic advances of Belarus.

In June 2009, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted in favor to grant the Belarusian Parliament’s Special Guest status, suspended since 1997, with the aim of engaging in a political dialogue with the authorities while supporting the strengthening of democratic forces and civil society in the country,” so long as Belarus abolishes the death penalty. However, the recent execution of two convicts in March 2010, the government’s treatment of the Polish minority, the absence of international observers during the local elections, and the authorities’ refusal to permit the establishment of the Council of Europe’s East European School of Political Studies led to the suspension of high-level contacts with Belarusian officials in late April 2010 amid “a lack of progress” in the country toward the Council’s standards.

REACHING OUT

Diplomats in Minsk help **connect** promising project ideas and potential Belarusian partners to foundations and NGOs outside. They can “act as contact points and mediators for us,” said one international civil society figure. Diplomats ensure that Belarusian civil society figures meet visiting officials, or get appointments with them when they are outside the country.

Diplomats also connect dissidents to external assistance, for example by facilitating efforts by the German Marshall Fund to allow opposition figures and their families to vacation in Slovakia to allow them to decompress. Lithuania has done something similar. Opposition leaders and their families – Aliaksandr Milinkevich and Iryna Kazulina, for example – have been able to receive medical care in the free world, in Poland, Germany and the US. Western diplomats, as a part of their usual diplomatic business, also regularly **convened** civil society and opposition activists in Belarus in efforts not only to give them a place to meet away from government surveillance, but also to encourage this often fractious group to work together toward the common goal of reestablishing democracy. This message has been reiterated

throughout the diplomatic community, which met them at their embassies, residences, dissidents' homes, and outside Minsk.

Given the pressures faced by Belarusian civil society and democratic opposition, **facilitating** the cooperation among this divided group is a challenge for diplomats. The basics of "retail" democratic politicking, such as direct constituency development to develop support, were often alien to the opposition, who were inclined to rely heavily on international support – and attempt to be favorites of different sponsors. This seems to have lessened since the 2001 and 2006 election debacles, with a growing recognition that opposition needs to hang together or hang separately. According to Kozak, the joint delegation "got" that they needed to work together toward reinstating democracy in Belarus before they could oppose each others' policy preferences – now was not that time.

The OSCE's AMG also facilitated the domestic observation of Belarusian elections from 1999-2001. A pilot project in 1999 for local elections was successful, and was followed by training thousands of observers for the subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections: 6,000 in 2000 and 15,000 in 2001. These efforts were opposed by both Belarus and Russia within the OSCE. The domestic observation effort was thwarted the day before the election, when the government rescinded accreditation for the observation coalition, *Viasna* ("spring").

While most **financing** is allocated at the capital level, many embassies in Minsk have funds they can disburse directly as needed to assist civil society projects. Most of these grants are small so as to work around Belarusian bureaucratic hurdles, and some are administered from outside the country, such as the Dutch MATRA program, which aims at supporting "social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe," administered from the embassy in Warsaw. The US government, Sweden's SIDA, Denmark's DANIDA, Polish Aid and Norway are enumerated in a recent study as being the main funders of civic activity in Belarus. Diplomats note that for Belarusian conditions, flexibility on their part, and the part of their own government aid agencies, is essential. Education is an area in which diplomats play an important role in directing funding. The Norwegian Embassy in Kyiv is helping repressed Belarusian students continue their education through the Nordic Council and EC mechanisms. The European Humanities University (EHU), once based in Minsk, was driven out by the Belarusian authorities who view it as subversive. The Lithuanian Government invited the school to continue as a university-in-exile based in Vilnius, and granted it accreditation and premises to use free of charge. The vice rector says, "Our project is academic. The authorities have a sort of interpretation of our project as a political project." The US and EU have collaborated to fund the EHU in exile in Vilnius. One student notes that at EHU "you can receive a free education, where you are provoked to express your thoughts, your feelings, and where you can discuss, you can argue. And if you don't like something, your opinion will always be taken into consideration." The Nordic Council of Ministers, the European Commission, and individual governments such as Hungary and Norway, are funders for about 650 students. The EU is primarily giving scholarships, while the US is funding their distance learning program, which is especially useful for students who have been expelled or kept out of school for their activism. The Nordic Council also funds up to 100 Belarusian students studying in Ukraine. Poland's Kalinauski program is among the largest educational efforts undertaken by the international community, with 300 Belarusian students being able to study in Polish universities. The Human Rights House in Vilnius, established by Norway, Sweden, the Czech Republic and the US, provides premises, accommodation and staff for conferences, training, research and studies outside Belarus.

Diplomatic embassies and missions also **showcase** democratic practices and norms for Belarusians, and not merely through events in Minsk, as the series of press conferences and public consultations around the EU's "What the EU could bring to Belarus" non-paper shows. There are other notable examples, such as the Swedish Association of Local Authorities' work with its counterparts in the regions of Belarus. To

showcase democratic practice, US Ambassador Stewart held a “Super Tuesday” party for Belarusians around the 28 primaries and caucuses held in the United States in February, contrasting by example the array of open contests with wide field of candidates with Belarus’ simple and closed system. She also holds annually a concert at her residence with Belarusian rock bands that cannot perform publicly in the country or get radio airplay, giving them some visibility. She hopes that this year’s concert can be broadcast on radio into Belarus for a wider domestic audience.

DEFENDING DEMOCRATS

Demonstrating solidarity with and support for civic and democratic activists in Belarus is a frequent activity for diplomats posted in Minsk, and helps protect dissidents from repression to a degree. Often EU ambassadors and others make a point of being seen together in meeting civil society. A visit to dissidents on hunger strike by a group of ambassadors elicited an angry response from the regime, which perceived public attention of this kind as a threat. Ambassador Wieck recalls that “on the eve of the presidential elections in 2001 Ambassadors of the EU countries and the Head of the OSCE mission accompanied the protest march of the opposition,” along with some members of the European Parliament. More recently, diplomats have made public statements about the continued imprisonment of Aliaksandr Kazulin. The US Ambassador, Karen Stewart, used to hold Christmas parties for the families of political prisoners. Slovak *Chargé d'affaires* Lubomir Rehak met political prisoner Zmitser Barodka upon his release from prison and escorted him home to meet his newborn twins, to ensure he did not face rearrest. In December 2007, the US Ambassador and Slovak *Charge d’Affaires* visited a leader of the youth opposition group Malady Front, Zmitser Fedaruk, at Minsk’s Clinical Hospital No. 9 after his being beaten-up at an unsanctioned opposition demonstration.

Diplomats also regularly meet with members of religious communities that often come under official pressure and harassment. Embassy personnel at all levels have also demonstrated these principles off the radar through direct engagement with the population on a whole host of topics – including utterly apolitical activities such as quilting – to forge people-to-people contacts. Such outreach has not been a constant. Civil society figures noted that some ambassadors have been less comfortable with a forward-leaning role, so that Belarusian civil society – and younger embassy staff – have experienced a sort of “whiplash” effect of shifting sharply from strong engagement to more cautious “old school” bilateral diplomacy.

Of the frontline support activities undertaken by diplomats in Belarus, **witnessing** trials and **verifying** the whereabouts and condition of political prisoners are among the most important. This is arranged through coordination among the democratic embassies (EU+US, essentially) to ensure that all such trials are covered, and prisoners checked-on. In one case, a professor, Yury Bandazheusky, was targeted by the regime for publishing a study that was at variance with the government’s policy that the dangers from the Chernobyl disaster were dissipating – this line being essential to restarting agriculture and industry in the region, a government priority. He was jailed for 8-10 years on trumped up charges that he was taking bribes from students. The EU worked successfully to get him released from jail. He was then furloughed to a collective farm, still under guard, where the German and French Ambassadors came to pay an unannounced visit to check on him. The professor ultimately was allowed to emigrate.

In undertaking such activities, diplomats can to a certain extent **protect** civic activists and dissidents. A host of civil society figures, Belarusian and foreign, agree that diplomatic presence at civic and opposition activity helps insulate Belarusians from regime repression. The broad diplomatic presence at the March 2006 demonstrations against election fraud is an oft-repeated example by Belarusian activists. But this pertains not only to demonstrations, or meeting over tea at the embassy or residence, but also to underground theater events and concerts. This engagement is part of standard operating procedure for the

diplomatic corps, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe. When former opposition presidential candidate Aliaksandr Milinkevich was detained in February 2008 with aides, the German Ambassador and US diplomats went to the detention facility where they were held, and the German Ambassador telephoned Milinkevich directly. During the March 2006 election and subsequent police crackdown, EU Common Foreign and Security Policy High Representative Javier Solana phoned Milinkevich. In the most recent cases of the imprisonment of Awtukhowich Asipenka on May 6, 2010 and of raids at the offices and flats of the Tell the Truth! activists on May 18, 2010, the British Embassy, as acting local presidency of the EU in Minsk, immediately expressed its deep concern about the events in respective official statements.

Western diplomats in Belarus have personally observed elections. For the local elections held on April 25, 2010, fifty representatives from 24 embassies were accredited by the Central Election Commission, including five US embassy officers, four diplomats representing Sweden and Lithuania each, and three representatives from the Polish, British, and Slovak Embassies. Interestingly, China also deployed three diplomatic election observers.

CONCLUSION / LOOKING FORWARD

Belarus remains strongly in the grip of President Aleksandr Lukashenka and his national security state, which further consolidated its control after the 2006 elections. “Belarus is like an experimental laboratory, where 10 million people are being kept in an ideology of totalitarianism and populism,” according to opposition leader Anatoly Labiedzka. However, due to the worsening relations with Russia, who for years supported Belarus regime with preferential economic treatment, and a faltering economy, in 2008 Aleksandr Lukashenka declared his willingness to pursue a dialogue with the West, released high-profile political prisoners and allowed the registration and distribution of some independent media outlets. The EU and the West enthusiastically responded by lifting some sanctions and engaging in dialogue with Belarusian authorities.

Despite Lukashenka’s newly proclaimed adherence to reforms and liberalization, above all in the economic sphere, the situation with human rights and freedom has again deteriorated in the first half of 2010, including persecution of civil society activists and journalists and the emergence of new political prisoners. The escalating pressure on civil society may be related to the forthcoming presidential election that is to be held on February 6, 2011 at the latest. At the same time, vulnerable economy that last year has been sustained with IMF loans and complicated relations with Russia will probably compel Lukashenka to balance between Russia and the West and to make efforts not to disappoint the West too much, providing windows of opportunity for civil society and political opposition.

Belarusian civil society and the opposition, not often on the same page, are continuing to undertake a great deal of soul-searching on how to move forward in an effort to transform Belarus into a democratic state. In this effort, the democratic diplomatic community is openly challenged to remain engaged, provide constant monitoring and reporting on the situation, tighten its coordination so each democracy can play to its strengths, and use the emerging windows of opportunity by which they can support Belarus’ growing number of democrats, who will ultimately prevail.