Introduction

It is ten years since the rise to power of President Aleksander Lukashenko in Belarus. Ten years that have seen the transformation of a democratically elected Presidency into an undemocratic authoritarian regime in which free media and political opposition have “disappeared.” Throughout these years, many different events have led the international community and the European Union to condemn Belarus and in some cases take political means against it. In October 2004, another two events take place, and it will be again time for the international community and Europe to decide how it will react.

This paper will look at current events, and evaluate the options for EU-Belarusian relations in the future. It will then set these into the wider context of the international community paying particular attention to Russia’s role.

Parliamentary Elections and Referendum

The Belarusian parliamentary elections and a referendum will take place on 17 October. If the outcome of the referendum is positive, it will allow the Belarusian constitution to be rewritten, allowing President Lukashenko again to run for office in 2006 without a further term limit. Expectations ahead of the elections are that they are unlikely to be democratic, and will result in a parliamentary assembly that will be controlled by Lukashenko’s allies.¹ Many opposition candidates have been blocked from ballots, and one opposition candidate, Valery Levonevski, has been imprisoned for two years to prevent him from running.² Other opposition figures have been similarly hindered, while numerous independent newspapers, and the European Humanities University have each been closed in the run up to the elections. As for the referendum itself, this is the second time that President Lukashenko has used a national referendum to rewrite the constitution. The first occasion was in 1996, when the President called a referendum to extend his powers both in scope and term of office. As in the past, the upcoming referendum is no more likely to be democratic than the parliamentary elections. As the OSCE denounced the last Presidential elections in 2001 as not being “free and fair,” there is little hope today that this election will bring about political change in Belarus.³

EU Reactions

How will the EU (and the US and Russia) react to these events?⁴ While the Commission and Council will most likely issue their official statements of condemnation there seems
to be an understanding both in the Council and the European Parliament that the response will have to be stronger than just words. In the Provisional Conclusions of September 13, the Council could not have been clearer: “If, however, the Parliamentary elections and the announced referendum do not take place under free and fair conditions, this cannot remain without its consequences for the relations.”v In the EP, led by the Polish MEP and Head of the Parliamentarian Mission to Belarus Bogdan Adam Klich (EPP-ED), each party filed a motion for a resolution in strong support of the Council’s conclusions.vi While such resolutions in themselves are not unique, in the case of Belarus, parliamentary actions take on a greater meaning. The EP is part of a Parliamentary Troika with the OSCE and Council of Europe parliamentary assemblies - key outside actors in for democracy and human rights in Belarus. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has already issued its own report condemning Belarus and calling for action.vii The Commission, in its Strategy Paper on Belarus for 2005-2006, has made similar threats, if in more diplomatic language.viii The conclusion, one can draw, is that the EU is preparing to respond with stronger action than in the past. It is now up to the European Commission and Council to define their options.

Possible Responses

How will the EU respond to this deterioration in Belarus? The three most likely responses, besides the official condemnation, are well known: sanctions, increased funding to the oppositions parties, and increased funding to NGOs and other civil society organisations.

The first option for the EU is to enforce sanctions. The idea of applying some type of sanctions to Belarus in itself is not new. In the past, travel sanctions have been applied to Mr. Lukashenko and his government, if only for a few months.ix While no full travel ban exists today, we have recently seen the EU attempt to prevent Yuri Sivakov, Belarus’ representative to the IOC, from attending the Olympic Games in Greece because of his role in the “disappearance” of four opposition members.x This attempt was expanded on September 28th when the EU and the US officially banned him and three other top Belarusian officials over the findings of the last OSCE report.xi

The EU has never, however, applied economic sanctions against Belarus. It has discussed it many times, but no formal action has ever been agreed. While the PCA Treaty has been suspended since 1997, it has continued normal trade relations under the Most favoured Nation (MFN) Treaty with the former Soviet Union, including the protocol of Generalised Tariff Preferences (GSP), which lowers the tariff rate on Belarusian goods entering the EU. In February of this year, the Commission formally launched the process to end the GSP, but no final action has been taken and the protocol is still in effect.xii

It would therefore seem, that from the EU’s past experience with Belarus, full political and economic sanctions are not an option. The main reason being that the end result would harm the EU more than it would harm the Belarusian government.
Trade Relations and Economic Sanctions

Economically, because of the souring of relations over the last ten years, Belarusian trade with the EU is extremely limited - only 0.1% of the EU-15 export to the country, and in percentage terms accounts for zero percent of the EU’s imports. Even after enlargement, these numbers do not increase much. Poland, Belarus’ largest EU neighbour, only accounts for 3% of Belarusian import/exports; Germany accounts for only 4% of Belarusian exports and 7% of Belarusian imports. The Belarusian government statistics put the Belarus exports to the EU-25 at 37% of Belarusian exports or 17% of total Belarus trade for 2003. Of this trade, however, the EU had a trade-surplus of 637 Million Euros (Belarusian import/Belarusian exports) in 2002, and still does. Therefore, any ban would hit EU business and harm the EU economy, even if only in a very small way.

More importantly, such sanctions would only have a very limited impact on the economy of Belarus itself because Belarus’ most important trading partner is not the EU, but Russia and the CIS states (former Soviet Union minus the Baltic states). 49% of Belarusian exports and 66% of imports go to/come from Russia in 2003. For the CIS as a whole, the percentages are 55% and 70%. Even if a large percent of these numbers come from raw materials (including oil and gas) and foodstuffs, the economy of Belarus would not be greatly harmed by the loss of high cost/luxury goods from the EU. As the aim of the EU is to force the Belarusian government to reform, it seems that full economic sanction would do little, other than further redirect trade towards Russia, and at the same time harm the average Belarusian citizen. It will certainly not cause the economy to collapse nor harm the political elites in Belarus.

At the same time, however, such sanctions might create a larger economic problem for the EU. While Belarusian exports and imports to the EU are tiny, these numbers do not fully take into account the massive amount of EU-Russia trade that must pass through Belarus. More than 50% of Russia’s global oil and natural gas exports go to the EU via Belarus. If one includes the fact that 80% of Russia’s road links to the EU also transverse Belarus, it is not hard to see the problems that could arise. There is little chance of an energy crisis caused by the blockage of EU-Russian trade by President Lukashenko (Russian President Putin would not stand for it), but there is little doubt that a European economic embargo could cause customs controls to “slow down” to the point that European firms would lose millions of Euros in time and money. Today, the Belarusian authority already has government stores for goods seized at the Belarusian borders. There is nothing to stop border authorities from discovering more artificial problems in European lorries, especially if they are unofficially supported by the government in Minsk.

Political sanctions

While once again the EU is morally correct in some Member States’ desire to cut all political relations, including the closing of Member State missions in Minsk, we would
see only a limited effect of such actions on Mr. Lukashenko’s government. Since 1997, few Member States formally talk to Belarus, even if they still retain missions in Minsk.\textsuperscript{xx} Most European missions are in fact located inside the compound of the Belarusian President, which has been extended following the embassy crisis of 1998. They are subjected to substantial pressure from Mr. Lukashenko himself.\textsuperscript{xxi} There is little doubt that the President would be happy to see them go, just as he was in 1998. At the same time, any closure would mean additional hardships for Belarusians trying to go to Europe. Today, a Belarusian wanting to come to Brussels must travel to Moscow for a visa, as there is no Belgian mission in Minsk.\textsuperscript{xxii} It is therefore not too difficult to imagine the problems that would arise from the closure of either the French or Polish missions in Minsk. By closing missions, you are actually placing a travel ban on not only the government, but also on society as a whole.

As for travel bans on government officials, this would be possible, and should be carried out. However, because few officials (outside the Belarusian missions in the Member States, OSCE, and UN) have travelled to the EU in the past ten years the effects of such a ban would only be very limited. Lukashenko’s last trip to Europe was to Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis, while he has travelled throughout the CIS and Middle East since then.

**Sanctions: An Assessment**

The final and most concrete result of full sanctions would be the freezing of TACIS and trans-border programmes. While the TACIS programmes are already limited, a full stop would mean the end of to the EU’s goal of aid to civil society, including to the media. In the area of humanitarian aid, ECHO provided 6.7 million Euros to Belarus for humanitarian assistance linked to the effects of the Chernobyl accident. While likely to be exempted, the blockage of such aid would serve no benefit. Trans-border programmes in the area of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) are also important to Europe and cannot be cut without problems. Belarus is a key transit point for the illicit trade in drugs and persons, and illegal immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The EU is well aware of this problem, as has been repeatedly stated by Commissioner Chris Patten.\textsuperscript{xxiii} On the Belarusian side, Mr. Lukashenko is also well aware of this fact, as he made clear in an infamous statement in November 2002 in which he announced the ‘Belarusian Flood’:

“I am confident that the Europeans will come crawling to Belarus to ask for co-operation in the fight against drugs trafficking and illegal migration. Because this is their most sensitive issue at the moment. So they cannot do without our co-operation or our support. Another thing: unless they pay we shall not defend Europe from these flows of migrants.”\textsuperscript{xxiv}

For all these reasons, full sanctions would not seem the most fruitful option. However, the EU should act, even if these actions are limited and have limited impact. Morally, the EU can no longer have a policy of ‘benign neglect.’ Therefore, the wisest option for the moment is **targeted sanctions** with the understanding that no single type of sanction will give way to a democratic change in the near future, and full sanctions would do more harm than good.
1. **Travel Bans** for all Belarusian officials, ranking from ministerial level (including cabinet officials of each ministry) to the Presidency. A limited access ban for lower officials to travel inside the EU should also be put into place. It must, however, be recalled that for practical issues, such as JHA, this will require, at the same time, increased contacts with lower-level officials in Belarus itself who will not be able to travel outside the country.

2. **Freezing bank accounts of Belarusian officials**, and the bank accounts of the President’s office. The President’s office is very important as a significant amount of Belarusian government funding and income comes from/to the president’s private budget. These steps will be difficult to complete without the assistance of the US, Swiss, and Russian authorities. This is because most funds are not located in banks under EU control/influence and Belarus itself is a known centre of money laundering so funds will be difficult to track.xxv

3. **Suspension of the GSP**, or targeted sectoral economic sanctions. While full sanctions cannot be applied, we can at least take away tariff discounts and other market instruments.

4. **An EU, and if possible UN, embargo on Belarusian arms exports**. If one wants to really attack Mr. Lukashenko’s funding and restrict Belarus’ role as a threat to the wider world, this is the one option that could have a lasting effect. But this will once again require international support and this support will be difficult to obtain from Russia (a key investor in the industry) and China.

While these recommendations would almost certainly result in a negative response from the Belarusian government, they would not exacerbate the often difficult situation of most Belarusian citizens.

**Increase Funding for the opposition**

Because sanctions alone will not be enough, continued funding to the opposition inside Belarus is also needed. While for many in the EU this is the easiest option, it also presents risks. These risks do not come from the Belarusian government, but from the fact that the West has been giving money to the opposition for more than ten years without effect. It is simple and easy to say that this is not the fault of the opposition, but of Mr. Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime. However, it is also the fault of the European Union in that much of the funding given to the opposition has been under the guise of ‘no questions asked.’ It should be in the EU’s own interest to ask question about where this funding is going. For example, how much of this funding is going to actually work against the government, how much is being spent on travel for opposition members to Brussels, other European capitals, and Washington, and how much is lost to corruption?xxvi.
A Programme for the Future

More important than money alone is to ask the opposition, which has never been a united group (ranging from communists to nationalists), to present clear plans for the time following Mr. Lukashenko’s removal from government. This is a question that is rarely asked when opposition members come to Brussels, and exactly the question that the Belarusian people are continually asking without ever receiving an answer. In his article on Belarus in the journal European-Asia Studies, Grigory Ioffe translates a pre-election survey from 2000 about the opposition. The first among many other complaints against the opposition was that it “failed to come up with an attractive and positive programme of its own.”xxvii This does not seem to have changed since then. It is one thing to come up with a “‘NO’ to Lukashenko” (the opposition’s slogan for the coming parliamentary elections) slogan; it is quite another to have a real plan for the future that goes beyond just being “pro-west.”

No Bias

Being perceived as “pro-west” also poses a problem for the opposition (as cited by Ioffe) and it is something that the EU would be wise to take into account. It would be very dangerous for the opposition to take an “anti-Russian” stance, because this is more than just a foreign policy issue. Firstly, the Belarusian population has an almost equal number of Russian and Belarusian speakers. Moreover it also has a sizable minority of ethnic Russians. The majority of foreign owned businesses are Russian, and most cultural links, established since World War II, tie the country to Russia. Being an anti-Russian or “pro-Belarusian” nationalist would also mean taking a position on the role of Russian language schools, Russian language media, official government documents, and the Russian Orthodox Church vs. the Uniate Church (Greek Catholic) in Belarus. Therefore, if the final goal of the EU is a democratic Belarus, not just a pro-western government, some of this increased funding must go to the formation of a more pro-Russian opposition. In the opposition today are parties that are pro-Russian, and many opposition leaders are well-known in Moscow, but for the most part the opposition voice is one that does not settle well in the Belarusian countryside. The opposition must be seen by the Belarusian people as more than a tool of the West against Russia. It should be seen as a real alternative to the current government that can represent an independent Belarus, which is both friends with Russia and with the EU.

In a recent survey carried out by IISEPS, a Minsk based think-tank, it was estimated that the percentage of Belarusian’s convinced that a change of regime is needed is 57.4%. However, only 9.4% knew of someone else who would be “worthy alternative candidate” (89.4% had no idea).xxviii If the opposition cannot put forward a worthy alternative with a strong platform, there is little hope for democracy in Belarus. It is clear that for an opposition candidate to oust Mr. Lukashenko Belarus needs Europe’s help.

For all its faults, there is still reason to fund the opposition, primarily because to stop funding the opposition is to remove internal pressure on the President, and to forget that the people who oppose him face real dangers everyday. Additionally, the EU needs the
opposition as a source of information. Without their activity, the EU information on the ground in Belarus would be far worse. But while we can all agree that funds should continue to flow, any decision to increase funding should be weighed carefully. Without the basic points discussed above, increase funding would have little effect. More money alone will not help the opposition’s case, but if it can meet the necessary prerequisites then the EU can look into other ways of helping the struggle.

Increased Funding for Civil Society

Of all the sectors of Belarus, civil society is the most threatened. An increase in funding here is not only needed, but it is also the measure most likely to have an effect on any future democratic Belarus. However, helping civil society is not a short-term option but rather a long-term commitment. Because of the continued crackdown on civil society organisations by the government, including the Presidential Decree no. 8 and no. 13, the later which was issued on 15 April 2003, open aid to most NGOs is almost impossible. Most legal aid, human rights, and other NGO groups have been harassed, “warned,” and in some case banned. Belarussian Justice Minister Viktar Halavanau reported on 29 January 2004 that his ministry conducted inspections of more than 800 NGOs last year, resulting in the judicial liquidation of 51 of them. Independent media has been extremely limited, and even Russian Television station NTV’s Minsk office was closed on 8 July 2003. The current level of propaganda being aired on Belarussian state TV and radio for Mr. Lukashenko’s referendum is further evidence that there is no independence in the state media despite election rules and laws otherwise.

Helping civil society, however, will become increasingly difficult in the near future, so at least some of this aid will have to be “unofficial.” This can give rise to the same problems as those faced by the opposition. Some civil society organisations are very liberal with whom they deem to be a “political prisoner” or subject to government repression, but these are by far the minority.

While the EU should give funding to civil society in Belarus itself, it must also search for other ways to help the population at large, because the suppression of civil society in Belarus is increasing to such a point that local societies will not be able to do it alone. For the rural areas, this would imply more aid for TACIS programmes and/or the creation of new programmes to help with agricultural reform. For urban areas, and border regions, increased funding for programmes which help SMEs and local community groups. This may also mean funding for religious organisations, even if it is limited. There is also a need for funding for daily border issues with the EU (such as the funding of co-operation efforts with the Belarussian administration on JHA issues, discussed above).

In terms of information, the EU should fund external sources of information. Independent satellite TV and radio transmits in Belarussian and Russian for Belarus, based outside Belarus. While Radio Free Europe funded by the US, and other “world services” still exist this alone is not enough.
From all that has been noted above, it seems logical that the EU should do everything in its power to help civil society by means of increased funding, but it should also increase programmes both inside and outside Belarus, even if this means more contact with the Belarusian government at the local and regional level.

**Russian and US Views**

The EU alone cannot get Belarus back on the tracks of democracy. The key to any future democratic state in Belarus is Russia. Russia holds the purse strings to Belarus, both in internal business and trade, especially in terms of oil and gas. Belarus is completely dependent on Russia’s goodwill to receive the petroleum needed to run its industry and heat the country. Russia has also continually given hope to the Belarusian government’s economic needs through ideas like the single state union, and in recent months the plan to create a customs union for four countries of the CIS, the so-called ‘four open spaces,’ even if none of these have come to be more than words on paper.

While Russian President Vladimir Putin has far less of a need for Mr. Lukashenko than did former President Boris Yeltsin had, Mr. Lukashenko is not without use to Moscow. Politically, President Putin has the closest links to the Belarusian President and is most likely the only person Mr. Lukashenko might listen to. President Putin and Russia have far more influence than any EU leaders, who have not taken a real interest to date. Without pressure from Moscow, little will change in Minsk. Russia will continue to be a backdoor exit for the Belarusian government against every EU action, and Belarus will continue to move away from Western values and back to the totalitarian ones of past. Belarus will have strong ties to Russia in the future as it undoubtedly should, but with Russia’s help, this could develop into strong ties between two democratic, independent countries.

The EU should also attempt to engage the US on Belarus. The United States have taken little active interest in Belarus. While it funds the opposition and issues State Department condemnations similar to the EU, the Bush administration has taken little note of Belarus at the highest levels. The United States has great influence, not via Belarusian president but via President Putin. If the US President could as much as raise the issue with President Putin, there is a chance for increased Russian pressure on Mr. Lukashenko. President Bush has not taken such action and nothing seems to indicate that he will take a tougher stance if re-elected in November. At the congressional level, however, the US House of Representatives passed a Belarus Democracy Act unanimously thereby supporting civil society and the media in Belarus with increased funding. It is likely to get similar support in the US Senate. This should add even more pressure for the administration to take action.

The EU must work with the United States and Russia in tackling the problems in Belarus. While the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is a forum for this, it is not enough. There should be a tripartite summit on Belarus as soon as possible. Only the EU can orchestrate such a summit, as neither Russia nor the US have shown that they will take the lead on this problem. Such a summit would be difficult, but a united
international policy on Belarus is needed, and if the EU and US can bring Russia into the fold, it would be far more powerful than just EU actions alone.

Conclusion

Taken together, these types of actions by the EU should have some effect on democracy in Belarus. Even if it will only be felt in the long-term. None of these actions will lead to a revolution of the kind we have seen in Georgia. This is not possible in the current political climate. Mr. Lukashenko is not Mr. Shevardnadze, and the opposition is far from united. Sadly, what is also clear from the analysis of the possible options suggested is that their effects will certainly be limited. No single measure, or even a short-term combination of measures, will lead to the EU final goal of a democratic state in Belarus. Only a long-term system of applying different pressures from the EU, US, and Russia and actions by the Belarusian people themselves can change the status quo. At the same time, even if the EU’s actions are limited in effect because of the problem of the lack of Russian support, the EU cannot afford to pretend the problems of the Belarusian people are not theirs as well. The neighbour’s house is on fire, and no fortress will protect Europe from the flames.

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1 In fact, the parliament has so few powers left after past reforms of the constitution, than, in the author’s opinion, even if it was controlled by opposition, it would have only very limited affect on Mr. Lukashenko’s power. The President prefers to rule by presidential decree, and appoints 8 of 56 members of the upper house of parliament, which can block most actions. The President also holds the power to dissolve parliament.

ii He and another opposition figure, Alexander Vasilyev, were imprisoned for “defamation of the President.”

iii OSCE Final Report on Presidential Elections in Belarus, 9 September 2001 (4 October 2001)

iv For a overview of EU-Belarusian history see: EPC Background paper Forgotten Borderland: Opinions for EU policy with Belarus

v Council of the European Union, General Affairs and External Relations Council, Final Conclusion (Provisional Version), External Relations, 12068/04 (Presse 251) page 15


vii Council of Europe Parliamentary resolutions on 28 May 2004 and 28 April 2004. Other reports and statements have also be created in the framework of the Parliamentary Trokia.


ix For more detail, please see the EPC background paper.

x Declaration by the [Dutch] Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the Belarusian delegation to the Olympic Games in Athens, 06 August 2004.

xi Council of the European Union, “Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on Belarus”, 12735/04, 27 September 2004

xii OJ C 40, 14.2.2004, p 4


xiv Belarusian government, via its Mission in Brussels.
It should be noted, however, that the Belarusian government disagree with these numbers and believes that its now has a trade surplus with the EU.

The Belarusian government puts the number at 47% for Belarusian export to Russia.

The Directory of the Oil & Gas Industry in Europe http://www.oilandgas.nl/country/belarus.php

As talks below the level the Presidency Troika (EU President, OSCE Chairman, COE President) have been stopped.

The district of the city were embassies were located suddenly started to “need urgent repairs” in the summer 1998, especially for its water/sewer system. Despite the fact that no embassies reported any problems with the water, the government ordered them to move. In the meantime, the whole district became the property of the Belarusian President and become guarded by Presidential police.

In the past, s/he could also go to Warsaw, but since enlargement, this is less of an option.

Just one example is his statement to the European Parliament on February 12, 2003.

Belarusian television, November 2002, translated by the BBC news website.

In August of 2004, the US Treasury indicated the Belarusian bank INFOBANK as one of two of the largest banks in the Oil for Food scandal in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. There is nothing stopping the government from doing the same for domestic funds.

With the level of corruption in Belarus, it is naive to believe that the opposition is protected from it.


IISEPS, “Belarussians are ready to support contender to A. Lukashenko but so far they don’t know such a candidate” June 2004 Hot News section, IISEPS website, http://www.iiseps.by/epress2.html

The Decree, not only blocks foreign funding of NGOs by way of too many government controls, but in affect bars public organizations from representing ordinary citizens in court, and blocks most human rights efforts.

ICNL Press Release: February 4, 2004

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