

Heritage Lectures

No. 826

Delivered February 6, 2004



Published by The Heritage Foundation

March 30, 2004

A Strategy to Democratize Belarus

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

As the October 2004 parliamentary elections in Belarus are becoming a priority for democratic forces in the country and for Western friends of Belarussian democracy, it is the time to act.

It is time to consolidate opponents of the status quo, reach out to the people, and give them hope. This is the task, first and foremost, for the Belarussian opposition, but also for those who understand that at stake is more than just the future of Belarus, important as it is. At stake is how willing—or unwilling—the West is to fight for liberty.

If the West is ready to defend freedom, what is a better place to start than its own home base—Europe? At stake is our own future. At stake in Belarus is how we handle rogue regimes—and friends of rogue regimes. Alexander Lukashenka was elected president in 1994 and then engineered his own re-election in 2001 with major violations of the Belarussian constitution and international democratic norms. The opposition refused to recognize the legitimacy of those elections.

In 1996, Lukashenka dismissed the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court and imposed his own constitution, further alienating the Belarussian elite. He has supported every dictator from Kim Jong Il, to Yasir Arafat, to Saddam Hussein.

In the case of Belarus, it is important to recognize that hard-line elements of the Russian government were strongly supporting Mr. Lukashenka and his pro-Russian rhetoric and policy. However, many in the Russian leadership have grown exasperated with

Talking Points

- The struggle for freedom in Belarus is greater than Belarus itself. It is also about preventing the process of rebuilding the Soviet empire.
- Can Belarus become a test case of Russia's policy of integration with the West based on shared democratic values? In a way, Belarus becomes a litmus test on Russia's future relationship with the West.
- The historic experience of the Soviet Union shows that pro-independence forces, from Central Asia to Moldova, learned from the leadership of the Baltic States. Once the communist leadership failed to stop the surge to freedom in Vilnius, Riga, and Tallin, others followed in Kyiv and Baku.
- As revolutions in Georgia and Serbia have demonstrated, political protests tied to elections—with appropriate preparation through political activities, public education, and international support—may be the magic mix that makes dictators disappear.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/europe/hl826.cfm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Lukashenka's antics, and even those with lower democracy standards may finally recognize that the dictator is becoming a liability for Moscow.

The Struggle for Freedom

The struggle for freedom in Belarus is greater than Belarus itself. It is about Russia helping, tolerating, or opposing democracy next year. It is about setting a good example for Russia and Ukraine. And it is also about preventing the process of rebuilding the Soviet empire—regardless of how nostalgic some people get in Moscow.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has remained a Jurassic Park of authoritarianism in the heart of a democratizing Europe. However, it is also a huge lab in which retrograde forces of the old Soviet regime are attempting to develop new models of repression, which they may apply in Russia, and possibly Ukraine. It is not accidental that the rumors of extending presidential terms in violation of existing constitutions are repeatedly floated and then vehemently denied—which makes them ever more credible—in Minsk, Moscow, and Kyiv.

It is true that Belarus was one of the most Soviet among all Soviet republics. It is true that the anti-communist and nationalist movement there was among the weakest. However, I do not want to blame the people of Belarus for what happened next.

There are other examples of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet camp, where the pre-reform conditions were appalling. Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine had all started from a point of severe disadvantage in comparison with the Czech Republic and Estonia. Nevertheless, their achievements are quite remarkable. Romania and Bulgaria are in NATO and on the way to EU membership, and in Ukraine, the democratic opposition leader Victor Yushchenko consistently remains the most popular presidential candidate.

If Russia's main priority in Belarus—safe and secure gas transit—is assured, it certainly should be no problem for Moscow to cooperate with the West to ease Lukashenka out. Can Belarus become a test case of Russia's policy of integration with the West based on shared democratic values? In a way, Belarus becomes a litmus test on Russia's future relationship with the West.

Lukashenka's Disastrous Performance

The performance of Belarus under Lukashenka, judged by objective international criteria, has been a disaster.

- Inflation is rampant.
- There has been no meaningful privatization.
- Agriculture is still collectivized.
- Seventy percent of the country's economic output of state-owned enterprises piles up in warehouses, as no one is willing to buy Belarussian goods.
- NGOs are denied registration.
- The country's human rights track record is so abysmal that the U.S. State Department's human rights report uses language reserved for totalitarian states.
- The regime has been cracking down on political opposition, independent media, and civil society activists.

However, Lukashenka's repression may be sowing the seeds of his own demise. The recent events in Georgia, some fatigue in Moscow with Lukashenka's escapades, and—most important—his utter failure to provide Belarussians with a road to a decent future may indicate that 2004 will be the year in which he could return to the *kolkhoz*—or, even better, be investigated and tried for abuse of power, for the disappearances and possibly murder of his political opponents, and for other crimes. Another solution for Lukashenka would be political asylum in North Korea, Syria, or Cuba—albeit those regimes may not last very much longer either.

The historic experience of the Soviet Union shows that pro-independence forces, from Central Asia to Moldova, learned from the leadership of the Baltic States. Once the communist leadership failed to stop the surge to freedom in Vilnius, Riga, and Tallin, others followed in Kyiv and Baku.

As revolutions in Georgia and Serbia have demonstrated, political protests tied to elections—with appropriate preparation through political activities, public education, and international support—may be the magic mix that makes dictators disappear. The freedom bug is contagious indeed.

What Should Be Done?

To facilitate Lukashenka's road from the presidency back to the farm, or from Minsk to Pyongyang, the opposition and supporters of Belarussian freedom should take several joint steps. These include:

- **Unification**, or at least sustained cooperation, of the three main groups comprising Belarus's opposition. If over 200 Belarussian opposition political parties, organizations, and NGOs are working at cross-purposes, the Lukashenka regime will play one against the other, rendering them ineffective.
- **Development** of a joint strategy, program, and projects, nominating single viable opposition candidates in each district. The demise of the liberal parties in the Russian December 2003 Duma elections indicates that refusal to cooperate leads to premature political death. Personal and group ambitions should wait till the dictator is no longer there.
- **Severe public criticism** of violation of election procedures, criticized in the past by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which should demand that the electoral laws are amended per past OSCE recommendations and that the OSCE elections observation mission is allowed to deploy in Belarus well ahead of the October 2004 elections.
- **Preparation** for declaring the elections illegitimate in case of election falsification and other violations.
- **Expanding** a domestic and international campaign to publicly investigate the disappearance of Lukashenka's political opponents; appointment of an international public tribunal to that end; and initiation of criminal procedures in Europe and the U.S. against those in the president's circle who ordered and participated in the murder of opposition politicians and journalists.
- **Building** up a democratic opposition youth movement and not leaving the field to the pro-Lukashenka BRYU (Belarussian Republican Youth Union).
- **Questioning** the idea of a joint army with Russia. Belarussian boys should not be sent as cannon fodder in Chechnya, and Russian soldiers

should not be posted on the Polish–NATO border. This is a prescription for more, not less, instability in Europe. The consequences of such Russian–NATO friction are hard to predict.

- **Preparation** of a turn-out-the-vote campaign for parliamentary elections, focused on youth and urban voters who traditionally mistrust Lukashenka.
- **Reaching out** by Europe and the U.S. to the voters of Belarus through significant and material support of the democratic opposition as well as using the tools of public diplomacy, such as international broadcasting from countries around Belarus on the AM band by opposition radio stations, launching opposition TV broadcasting, and expanding people-to-people and educational exchanges.
- **Consultations** with Russia regarding a possible change of regime that will make Belarus more predictable and will benefit Russia by eliminating the need to subsidize the Belarussian economy through below-market-price natural gas, which provides over \$2 billion a year to the inefficient state sector, and by making the transit route for Russian gas to Europe more stable and less prone to interference by Minsk. Russia does not need a basket-case economy led by a basket-case dictator as an albatross around its collective neck. Russians should know that if integrated, the bacilli of Belarussian authoritarianism may exacerbate their country's own tendency to limit freedom.

Conclusion

The business of freedom in Eastern Europe is not over. Belarus, just like Ukraine and Moldova, has not fully completed its transition from the Soviet system to democratic capitalism. It is the duty of neighbors near and far to help complete the process and to reach the safe coast of democracy, security, and prosperity.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered at the Conference on the Future of Democracy Beyond the Baltics, held in Riga, Latvia, on February 5–6, 2004.