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BELARUS: EUROPE'S LAST DICTATORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike its neighbours 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. It truly 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 (as are 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. World War II devastated the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR): 2.2 million died, including the republic’s massive Jewish population. Historian Timothy Snyder calls Belarus, along with Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states, the “Bloodlands,” in which 14 million were killed before, during and immediately after World War II for political and identity reasons alone, not as direct casualties of combat.

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In the following decades as a “front line republic,” the Byelorussian SSR became a centre of the Soviet military-industrial complex, as a prosperous showcase 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. 70 percent of the fallout fell in the republic, particularly in the southern agricultural regions around Homel; up to 20 percent of the country remains unsuitable for residence or agriculture. The health effects on millions of Belarusians are being assessed and debated to this day.

Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, launched into his glasnost and perestroika policies in 1986 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. In 1998, the discovery of mass graves from the Stalin era at Kurapaty helped accelerate these stirrings.

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

Post-Independence Democratic Window – and Its Closure

The country faced all the difficulties that 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. Belarus’ economy took a heavy hit as producer of finished products for the now non-existent Soviet market.

At the time, the learning curve was steep for all involved — including the democratic countries and international institutions that tried 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 the centralized 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

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percent of the vote 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 Thirteenth Supreme Soviet. Lukashenka did not have a working majority, and was able to count on less than one-third of the votes. He soon began to exhibit the paranoia and bizarre behaviour 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 US pilot and co-pilot. Pressure also increased against the use of the Belarusian language during 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 of the Party of Communists of Belarus and economic liberals in Parliament. Working to head off impeachment, he developed a clone party, the Communist Party of Belarus, along with two others to siphon support from his adversaries. He held a referendum in November 1996 and then dissolved 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. Not surprisingly, he 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,” noted one seasoned observer. “Lukashenka had set up a system more akin to the ‘regime parties’ of the old East Germany,” according to German diplomat Helmut Frick. 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 British academic Andrew Wilson (2005), by “denying any normal space for meaningful contest...public politics since 1996 has often been little more than shadow-boxing.” None of Belarus’ elections since Lukashenka took office have been qualified by the ODIHR as free and fair.

Pressure on independent factors of public life — such as independent broadcasters and publications, academic freedom in educational institutions, civic associations, minority religious congregations — became increasingly acute in the late 1990s. In 1997, several activists signed Charter 97, a pro-democracy manifesto calling for respect for all internationally recognized democratic rights and civil liberties.

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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.”

German Ambassador Frick, who arrived in 2001, “expected to see the agony of the old Soviet system. [He] 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.”¹ 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.”² Lukashenka’s was a “softer regime than the GDR or Romania, but [it was] as efficient in suppressing human rights and the opposition tendency.”³

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 massive 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: Slobodan 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 assured 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, which had occurred next door in Ukraine just over a year before, and had been witnessed in person by many in the Belarusian opposition. The lessons applied by the opposition were unity, non-violent discipline and popular concentration in visible public space while

1 Personal interview, February 26, 2008.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

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awaiting electoral results, among others. Two opposition challengers, Aliaksandr Milinkevich and Aliaksandr Kazulin, ran against Lukashenka.

The regime was closing the remaining public space by deregistering and harassing NGOs and criminalizing foreign assistance to them. 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. 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. In March 2007, thousands marched in Belarus, calling for Lukashenka to leave office; the demonstration was violently suppressed.

A later march to a prison to demand the release of political prisoners, led by Aliaksandr Kazulin, resulted in a violent assault on him and a number of others, and 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 ninetieth anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic (which was soon invaded by Soviet Russia and subsumed into the later-formed Soviet Union). In June 2008, the Parliament passed a media law restricting online reporting. The civil society remains under tight grip of the regime, since the criminal code imposes heavy penalties for running NGOs without official registration.

Since mid-2008, Belarusian civic advocates — both in the country and outside — noted that the Lukashenka regime was applying less brute pressure than it had to date. In August 2008, former presidential candidate Kazulin and two other dissidents, Andrej Kim and Sergei Parsyukevich, were released from jail. The removal of some of the most notorious figures of the regime’s repressive apparatus, 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!” signalled the softening of Lukashenka’s regime and the willingness to abandon some hardline practices. In an unprecedented move, the three independent media outlets — *Narodnaya Volya*, *Nasha Niva* and *Uzgorak* — were allowed to publish in Belarus and were included in the state distribution network.

Given the built-in advantages of media, administrative and legal dominance, the September 2008 parliamentary elections unsurprisingly resulted in a sweep by government candidates. All 110 seats in the House of Representatives were occupied by pro-government candidates. The 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 maintained its policy of normalizing relations with Belarus. Many European officials called for continuing the dialogue with Minsk, a policy demonstrated by the visit to Minsk of then EU High Representative for CFSP Javier Solana, and his meeting with President Lukashenka in February 2009. But the thaw was not to last.

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On April 25, 2010, Belarus failed another test for democratization, when 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, winning only a handful of 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 again deteriorated, with a presidential campaign looming. 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 is the country’s 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 appeared 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 September 2010, EU High Representative for the CFSP Baroness Catherine Ashton called for an investigation into the supposed suicide of Charter 97’s webmaster, Oleg Bebenin, who was found hanged in his apartment.

In February 2010, the Union of Poles of Belarus (UPB), an ethnic Polish cultural organization unrecognized by the Belarusian authorities headed by Andzelika Borys, (ethnic Poles constitute about 4 percent or 400,000 of Belarus’s 9.7 million people) came under legal assault and denied registration, while the so-called “official” UPB, led by Stanislau Syamashka, a splinter group from Borys’ group, is fully backed and recognized by authorities. Since 2005, members of Borys’ UPB have been subject to regular harassment and persecution. In February 2010, for example, police seized the Polish House in Iyvanets, a small city some 30 miles west of Minsk, forcibly evicting all the UPB activists from the building in favour of Syamashka’s official UPB. In addition, Borys and other activists were fined, with up to 40 activists receiving 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 toward Belarus following this attack on minority rights.

Presidential elections were held in December 2010; although Lukashenka won, the entire process (leading up to and day of) was found flawed by the ODIHR and

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domestic observers. In demonstrations attracting thousands in Minsk, 600 were arrested, often violently. Lukashenka was inaugurated the following month.

In April 2011, a bomb was detonated in the Minsk Metro system, killing 15 commuters. The two men accused of planting the bomb, Dmitry Konovalov and Vladislav Kovalev, were found guilty and sentenced to death in November 2011, in a trial rife with irregularities, according to local and international human rights observers. The men were reportedly subjected to torture in KGB custody. Despite international and domestic protests, Konovalov and Kovalev were executed in March 2012. Independent polling found that following the executions, capital punishment lost majority support in Belarus. According to the mother of one of the executed men, even the Russian FSB, which had been consulted in the investigation, found that the CCTV footage used as incriminating evidence had been edited. Neither man had any trace of explosives or other incriminating material on his person. Belarusian activists openly suspected that the KGB itself planted the bomb.

Belarus’ economic woes also deepened. Since 2007, the country’s dispute over gas payments and transit fees with Russia has recurred regularly. In January 2010, Belarus threatened to cut electricity to Russia’s Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad. By June of that year, Lukashenka shut down gas transit westward, but then paid his country’s outstanding debt to Russia later in the month, under considerable pressure. In the summer of 2011, the country experienced a balance of payments crisis draining its foreign currency reserves. Neither Russia nor the IMF came to the government’s assistance.

The repression of political and civic opponents also continued in 2012. In March, 16 opposition leaders, independent journalists and human rights defenders, along with Andrei Sannikov’s lawyer, were prevented from leaving Belarus. A presidential edict in July allowed the KGB to ban the exit of those under “preventive supervision,” that is, those citizens capable of “being able to create a threat to national security.” The following month, Sannikov and Zmitser Bandarenka were granted presidential pardons and released. In August, Zmitser Dashkevich, a political activist who was arrested in advance of the 2010 presidential election had one year added to his sentence for “persistent disobedience,” a charge also levelled at others. Local human rights defenders classified 12 persons as Belarus’ remaining political prisoners. The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly’s Rapporteur for Belarus, Estonian Andres Herkel, noted in his October 2012 report that political prisoners were being pressured to admit guilt and seek pardons. Political prisoner Aleś Bialitski was awarded the Lech Wałęsa Prize for his work for freedom and human rights in Belarus in September 2012. He was also nominated by 83 Members of European Parliament for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Political prisoner Siarhei Kavalenka was released with conditions on September 26. In its 2012 press freedom rankings, Reporters without Borders rated Belarus 168 of 179 countries.

In July 2012, two Swedish activists who were also representatives of an advertising firm flew a light aircraft from Lithuania, dropping hundreds of small teddy bears with messages supporting freedom of expression in Belarus. Several high-ranking

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air defence officers resigned in humiliation. But even the gleefully absurd can turn nasty quickly in Lukashenko's harsh realm. The real estate agent who rented them lodging was arrested. A journalism student who published photos (which were sent anonymously to him) was also arrested. Both men are charged with complicity in an illegal crossing of the state border. If convicted, they can be sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The Swedish Ambassador also did not get his accreditation renewed as a result.

The September 2012 parliamentary elections saw not opposition members elected, but rather, only members of five pro-regime parties. The ODIHR found the poll inconsistent with international standards. Rather than opening, it appears that Lukashenka intends to keep his country locked-down tight.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES

The world's established democracies, particularly in Europe and the US, undertook efforts to assist Belarus' independence and democracy in the early 1990s, a period of heady optimism. Much assistance to Belarus at this time focussed on securing the nuclear weapons left by the Soviet armed forces on the country's territory and ensuring their secure transport to Russia, as well as on treating the health and environmental legacy of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Democracy assistance focussed heavily on state institutions, and economic assistance was channelled 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, nor was there much of a track record on *how* to constructively support civil society. International organizations themselves were adapting, with the OSCE 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 January 1995 entry into NATO's Partnership for Peace program, open to all post-socialist states in Eurasia. This arrangement was not strictly security focussed: 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 and PACE special guest status for Lukashenka's hand-picked Parliament.

In 1997, in response to the government's subversion of democracy, the OSCE dispatched, with the full approval of the Belarusian authorities, an Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) headed by German Ambassador Hans Georg Wieck. The mission had a very broad mandate to provide advice to both governmental and non-governmental actors in Belarus, and to endeavour to get the government to bring its

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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 allowing democratic states to work directly in a country to promote the implementation of internationally accepted democratic norms. It was reaffirmed at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999 by the leaders of all OSCE members, including Belarus’ Lukashenka government.

In the same period, however, the Belarusian government launched into a bizarre confrontation with the international community over diplomatic residences at Drazdy in Minsk. This neighbourhood also includes the presidential residence. Officially, the eviction of Western diplomats from their residences was for “necessary repairs.” Many were physically prevented from re-entering their homes, which had their doors welded shut. There are competing theories of why Lukashenka insisted on this course. 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 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.⁴

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 these highly flawed elections, the September 11 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 its projects had to be approved by the government. Reducing the 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.⁵ The EU adopted targeted sanctions against regime figures beginning in 2002. In 2004 these “restrictive measures” (visa bans and asset freezes) were expanded and extended; the US adopted its own the same year.

Nonetheless, assistance to Belarus’ growing and strengthening 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”

4 Personal interview with Frick, 2008.

5 Personal email with Ambassador Hans Georg Wieck, March 4, 2008.

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entitled “What the European Union Could Bring to Belarus” in November 2006, listing the potential benefits 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 and restrictions, while 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 the UN General Assembly to reject of its bid in favour 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, ostensibly in retaliation for sanctions against the Belneftekhim energy concern, but in reality, as an effort to cripple democracy support activities. 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 “facilitate[e] approximation toward the European Union” (Council of the European Union, 2009). 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 likely allusion to Russia, Lukashenka said Belarus was intent on improving relations, “no matter whom that displeases.”

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

Civic activists noted in 2009 that there was “more freedom in the air” and “definitely less repression,” but cautioned that only the release of the political prisoners would be concrete. The thaw in relations between Minsk and Western democracies was new, and came at a time when the divide had grown between Minsk and Moscow. Belarus needed foreign investment and loans, as the economy, long a selling point for Lukashenka, was in deep trouble. US and EU overtures to the Belarusian government in the hope of encouraging the country’s transition to genuine democracy were rebuffed or ignored. In contrast to the hope generated in 2008-2009, a new wave of repression against civil society began in spring 2010 and continues to date. Flash mobs organized by mobile phone text messaging and other social media brought thousands into the streets to clap simultaneously.

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The government saw this as a subversive act and arrested hundreds. The March 2012 execution of the two men for the 2011 Minsk Metro bombing was roundly condemned, and the EU withdrew its ambassador in Belarus at this time. European governments, parliamentarians and Council of Europe representatives continue to call regularly for the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights and democratic freedoms in Belarus.

The EU’s efforts, driven by Belarus’ neighbour Poland, to try and promote an opening in Belarus through the Eastern Partnership, have come to naught as far as Belarus is concerned. In May 2013, EU Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle stated before parliamentarians from five of the six member countries that 2013 is “a decisive year for the Eastern Partnership,” noting that a November summit in Vilnius would succeed or fail depending on what was accomplished. Belarus had no representatives in the room because of the continued imprisonment of political prisoners disqualified it.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS OF DIPLOMATS IN BELARUS

The democratic diplomatic community in Minsk includes the following EU members: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The United States also has an embassy, as do Georgia, India, Israel, Japan, Serbia, South Korea and Turkey. Other democracies cover Belarus from their embassies in Moscow, Warsaw, Vilnius or Kyiv. The European Commission opened its representative office in Minsk in April 2008 (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 to convey European values and standards, particularly in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Belarus is one of the few European states that is not a member of the Council of Europe. 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 can rely on the strong **support of home authorities** — more than most diplomats can count on — made manifest in public statements by senior officials. For example, US Ambassador Stewart was able to arrange for an audience with President George W. Bush for a broad group of Belarusian civil society and opposition representatives. The French Ambassador arranged similar

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high-level meetings with Aliaksandr Milinkevich when he was the main opposition candidate for the 2006 presidential elections, as did the Czechs, Poles and others.

The potential **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 only permit them to leave their homes for work. Diplomats on the ground also convey personal sanctions targets such as visa bans and asset freezes to their governments, in order to build leverage on the Belarusian government. These lists have expanded over time to include figures who are 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 channelled through projects that do not require governmental approval, such as scholarships and other support for students who have left Belarus fleeing repression, or who remain in Belarus but have been expelled for political activism. The European Humanities University (EHU), founded in Minsk but now forced to operate in exile in Vilnius, is one manifestation of this support.

Solidarity with Belarusians seeking a freer political system remains 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.”⁶ 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 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 DIPLOMAT'S TOOL BOX 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

6 Personal interview with Wieck, 2008.

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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 Lukashenka regime’s efforts to squeeze Belarusian out of the public square. This conveys **respect** for Belarusians. Swedish head of mission Stefan Ericsson was “very popular in Minsk...[he] speaks Belarusian better than 70 percent of Belarusians,” according to one late Belarusian civil society figure. A senior opposition adviser said that such an ability to speak Belarusian “is very important for those with national consciousness.” Ericsson has also 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 ninetieth 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 the use of the Belarusian language with opposition political activity. In 2009, the dictation event was repeated, with 10 foreign diplomats participating. Another example of the interest that 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, played 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. German 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 the 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 the staff 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 AMG, for example, with its wide mandate, reported regularly to the OSCE Permanent Council on the regime's numerous transgressions of its OSCE commitments, 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, which 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."⁷ Silitski (2008) 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 neighbouring countries, including the EU-funded European Radio for Belarus, Polish and Lithuanian Belsat, and US-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. As these stations air primarily on shortwave frequencies, the audience of these stations is unfortunately rather low. A breakthrough effort was the launch of the first independent Belarusian TV station, Belsat, operating from Poland, on Human Rights Day, December 10, 2007. Although denied registration in Belarus and accessible only via satellite, this TV channel has a broad network of its own correspondents in Belarus providing independent and unbiased news coverage exclusively in Belarusian. The channel is funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with support from the US Department of State, the British Embassy and Irish Aid. According to the channel's statistical data, it is watched by 10–20 percent of Belarusians — between one and two million people.

Diplomats also work around the media blockade to inform the public. Radio Racyja, supported by the Polish government, is broadcast from the Polish border city of Białystok. 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 European Commission'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.

7 Personal interview with Frick, 2008.

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US Ambassador Stewart notes that while Belarusian TV follows all of 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 Internet blog,⁸ 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 AMG under Ambassador Hans Georg Wiecek; the second involving an attempt to draft a road map out of isolation by the US Ambassador, Mike Kozak.

The AMG 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, when the Belarusian authorities denied visa renewal to its international staff. This was 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 Kozak endeavoured 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 road map, 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 the actions that 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

8 The blog is available at: <http://zubritanets.livejournal.com/>.

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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.”⁹

Unfortunately, while there was broad approval in the Belarusian government for this approach, it was scuppered by 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 [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.”¹⁰ 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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ 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 that “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 advise 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. There is some disagreement among Belarusian analysts on how effective the visa bans and asset freezes are. One opined that “they introduce sanctions and Luka runs with these sanctions to Moscow [to extract concessions]...So, from Luka’s perspective, the US is [a] 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 and the 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,

9 Personal interview with Ambassador Kozak, January 22, 2008.

10 Ibid.

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the government engaged in consultation with the OSCE on media and the election law. The EU also began 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, PACE voted in favour of granting 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 abolished the death penalty. However, the execution of two convicts in March 2012, 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 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 outside of Belarus, 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 re-establishing 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 that Belarusian civil society and democratic opposition face, **facilitating** the cooperation among this divided group is a challenge for

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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 favourites 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 Ambassador Kozak, the joint delegation which went to meet then President Bush “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 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. Some are administered from outside the country, such as the Dutch Matra Programme, which aims to support “social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe,” administered from the embassy in Warsaw. The US government, SIDA, Denmark’s Danida, Polish Aid and Norway are enumerated in a 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 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, granting 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 the EU have collaborated to fund the EHU in exile in Vilnius. At present, the school educates 1,800 students. 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.” Another noted that “the system of secondary education in Belarus brainwashes students,” while yet another added “nobody [in Belarus] encouraged us to ask questions. Here it is totally different.” Collectively, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the European Commission and individual governments such as Hungary and Norway, as well as the Soros Foundation, fund about 650 students. The EU is primarily giving scholarships, while the US funds their distance learning

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program, which is especially useful for students who have been expelled or kept out of school for their activism. The Nordic Council funds up to 100 Belarusian students studying in Ukraine, and 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, 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 2008, contrasting by example the array of open contests and wide fields of candidates with Belarus’ simple and closed system. She also holds an annual concert at her residence with Belarusian rock bands that cannot perform publicly in the country or get radio airplay, giving them some visibility.

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. EU ambassadors and others often 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. Former US Ambassador Stewart used to hold Christmas parties for the families of political prisoners. Former Slovak chargé d’affaires Ľubomir 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 re-arrest. In December 2007, the US Ambassador and Slovak chargé d’affaires visited a leader of the youth opposition group Malady Front, Zmitser Fedaruk, at Minsk’s Clinical Hospital No. 9 after he was beaten up at an unsanctioned opposition demonstration.

Diplomats also regularly meet with members of religious communities who 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.

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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 (the EU and the US, essentially) to ensure that all such trials are covered and prisoners checked on. In one case, Professor Yury Bandazheusky was targeted by the regime for publishing a study that was at variance with the government’s official line that the dangers from the Chernobyl disaster were dissipating. This policy was seen as 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 took 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. Ultimately, Professor Bandazheusky 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 to 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. **Protecting** applies not only to demonstrations, or meeting over tea at the embassy or residence, but also to underground theatre events and concerts. This engagement is part of the standard operating procedure for the diplomatic corps, but 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 American 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 CFSP 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, 50 representatives from 24 embassies were accredited by the CEC, 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. Subsequent elections in December 2010 and September 2012 were also observed by diplomats posted to Belarus, along with international

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observers assembled by the ODIHR. Each time, those observers from Western democracies found the process deeply out of order.

CONCLUSION/LOOKING FORWARD

Belarus remains strongly in the grip of President 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.

The democratic world’s hopes for an opening resulting from Lukashenka’s worsening relationship with Moscow and his resulting need for foreign capital were dashed very soon after they arose. Repression bit anew beginning in 2009 and continues to this day, with 12 persons still imprisoned for their political or other legitimate activities and beliefs, and still many more bearing the stain of having been convicted for such “crimes.”

In August 2012, Lukashenka appointed a new foreign minister, Vladimir Makei, formerly of the presidential administration. While subject to an EU travel ban and asset freeze, he is considered “a pro-European voice in the Belarusian ruling circles.” Thus far, there have been no appreciable results to warrant any hope for positive developments.

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 following the brief thaw and renewed crackdown. 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.

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