

Belarus in Self-Imposed Isolation

Conflict with Poland and other Neighbors Poses Security Problems
for the European Union

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Belarus exacerbated its self-imposed international isolation during summer 2005. Poland suspended relations in response to the expulsion of Polish diplomats and attacks on members of the Polish minority. Alexander Lukashenko has maneuvered his autocratic system into diplomatic quarantine with verbal invective against Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and Georgia. Belarus's neighbors Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia have agreed to coordinate their policies toward the country, but the European Union still lacks a firm position, partly out of consideration for Russia. At the same time, relations between Belarus and the Russian Federation are also troubled. A conflict of more than merely regional scope is brewing on the Union's eastern border.

The Lukashenko system has maintained its absolute grip on power for more than ten years by increasing the repression of internal opponents, impeding the free exchange of information, and repeatedly criticizing neighboring states. Belarus's self-imposed isolation within Europe reached new heights in the summer months of 2005. Communication between Minsk and its EU neighbors has to all intents and purposes ceased, and Poland has recalled its ambassador from Minsk. That level of disruption to communication between neighboring states fosters instability. This is not the first serious crisis in relations between Belarus and the European Union; in 1998 Lukashenko had expelled EU ambassadors from their residential complex at Drosdy. That time coordinated action by member

states helped to persuade the Belarussian leadership to back down, but in summer 2005 Brussels restricted itself to verbal criticism. At the same time, the unwieldiness of EU foreign policy generates dissatisfaction with Brussels among the governments of Belarus's European Union neighbors.

In fact, the embassies crisis is just *one* element of the diplomatic rupture between Minsk and its neighbors. Relationships with Poland and Lithuania are particularly badly affected. The diplomatic crisis and the anti-democratic developments in Belarus led the prime ministers of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine to set up a working group in September 2005 to coordinate neighboring states' activities against the Lukashenko regime. The Community of

Democratic Choice in the region between the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea, which was set up at the same time at the initiative of Georgia and Ukraine, pulls no punches in its criticism of the regime in Minsk. Lech Kaczyński, a promising Polish presidential candidate, has threatened his neighbor with “even more decisive action.”

Fear of Revolution in Minsk

Belarus’s latest round of self-isolation began with the “color revolutions” in Georgia and the Ukraine. Especially since the transition of power in neighboring Ukraine, the Belarussian leadership has reacted even more sharply than before to any sign of political criticism at home. Demonstrations—like the one on the April 26, 2005, anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster—have been broken up by force, Ukrainian sympathizers of the Belarussian opposition locked up for days, and potential opposition candidates for the 2006 presidential elections arrested.

In the eyes of the presidential administration in Minsk, the danger from abroad is currently greater than from the still structurally weak domestic opposition. Ukrainian students, Lithuanian intellectuals, and local advocacy groups of the Polish minority within the country are branded as the fifth column of NATO and the West. Official statements from Minsk are still permeated by Cold War rhetoric—claiming that groups working in Ukraine, Lithuania, and especially Poland want to destabilize Belarus and curry favor as lackeys of the United States. The embassies of the new EU member states have come in for particularly harsh criticism, with President Lukashenko repeatedly insulting their staff as “charlatans.”

Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine

On July 27, 2005, the Belarussian leadership ordered the storming of the offices of the Union of Poles in Belarus (PZB) in the western Belarussian city of Grodno and had several activists arrested. With 30,000

members, the PZB is the largest association of its kind in the country. To date it has worked primarily for the interests of the approximately 400,000 Poles living in Belarus, concentrating especially on education, history, culture, religion, and language. There are currently sixteen Polish cultural centers, largely in the western part of the country that belonged to Poland until the end of the eighteenth century and between the two world wars. The archaic political culture of today’s Belarus has caused the Union of Poles to undergo a process of politicization. When the PZB elected Andzelika Borys as its new leader at the end of June it became the target of a campaign of persecution led by Prosecutor-General Viktor Sheyman.

It is no secret that these repressive measures are motivated by the government’s fear that Grodno could become a second Lviv and Borys a new rallying figure at least for the Poles. For a long time Minsk had emphasized that the homogeneity of Belarussian society set it apart from other post-Soviet societies racked by national and ethnic conflicts, but the events of Grodno tell a different story. The PZB has been massively prevented from carrying out its work freely and recently split after being forced to accept a new leadership chosen by the regime.

In response to the expulsion of three Polish diplomats, Poland recalled its ambassador, Tadeusz Pawlak, and expelled Belarussian embassy staff. At the Solidarnosc anniversary celebration in Gdansk, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski—who has to date only held one official meeting with Lukashenko, in 1996—demanded that the Polish minority’s problems in Belarus must be resolved in accordance with European standards.

Bilateral relations between Poland and Belarus are currently largely restricted to trade. Its volume in 2004 amounted to \$1.2 billion, and Poland is Belarus’s fourth-largest trading partner. The current crisis poses a serious threat to these ties. Smooth cooperation seems almost impossible, espe-

cially after Lukashenko accused Poland of always acting “on orders” from Washington.

The president in Minsk also suspects Lithuania of involvement in activities designed to topple his regime. Recently he spoke of “numerous bases” that were being set up in “Poland and Lithuania.” The West’s plans, he said, went as far as contemplating “intervention,” but Belarus knew how to defend itself. “We have enough experience and we haven’t forgotten our history.” Lithuania has again become the place of exile for Belarussian intellectuals, the place of printing of opposition newspapers, and the place of founding of the European Humanist University recently expelled from Minsk. These developments have opened up an unbridgeable rift with the regime in Minsk and, as with Poland, relations with Lithuania have more or less been broken off.

Since the Orange Revolution, the southern neighbor Ukraine has often been cited as a cautionary example. Large parts of the Belarussian population have swallowed the propaganda that Belarus has to be saved from the “chaos” experienced by Kiev. Members of the Ukrainian opposition movement Pora have been turned back at the border, and Belarussian oppositionists stopped from traveling to Ukraine.

In order to suggest that his system is more advanced than Ukraine, Lukashenko also cites debts of \$100 million that Ukraine has owed Belarus since the early 1990s for investment goods. Despite his own country’s difficult relations with Belarus, President Viktor Yushchenko has offered to mediate in the conflict with Poland. In view of the potential threat Lukashenko sees in the Orange Revolution, this is rather unlikely to lead to success.

Russia: Policy in Flux

The diplomatic crisis between Belarus and Poland provoked by Minsk bears potential for wider regional conflict; in its wake the already difficult relations between Warsaw

and Moscow are coming to a head. Parts of Russia’s political class see Poland’s attitude to Belarus as one element of a “Western crusade” that began in Georgia, moved on to Ukraine, and is now turning its attention to Belarus. One section of the Russian elite does indeed stand wholeheartedly behind Lukashenko, but that does not apply to Vladimir Putin. The relationship between Moscow and Minsk is characterized by talk of confederation and the stationing of Russian troops and weapons in Belarus on the one side, and a latent crisis of relations on the other. Since July 2005 Russia has had no ambassador in Belarus because of statements made by the appointed ambassador, Dmitry Ayatskov, whose arrival in Minsk has been repeatedly announced and postponed. Before taking up his post, the ambassador—the former governor of Saratov, who held ambitions to succeed Boris Yeltsin in 1999—said: “It is very, very difficult to get Lukashenko down. ... Of course he has to realize the main thing: namely, that Russia is Russia, Belarus is Belarus, Putin is Putin, and Lukashenko is Lukashenko. And he certainly should not get any big ideas that he has been in office for a long time and somebody else has to run errands for him.” This outburst not only harmed relations with Belarus, it also caused further damage to Russia’s international standing. After the poor figure that Russia cut during the Ukrainian elections, Ayatskov’s remarks even caused irritation in Moscow. At the same time the scandal also shows that the Russian elites by no means adhere to a single line on the Lukashenko regime. The frequency of such critical statements has increased in advance of the election year.

Deficits in EU Neighborhood Policy

EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner declared in August 2005 that the Union would use all means at its disposal to promote democracy and pluralism in Belarus, but she also is also reserved about the Polish/Baltic/Ukrainian position. Brussels fails to recognize the

dangers and the threefold risk of crisis that emanate from this conflict. *Firstly*, during September tensions between the eastern EU member states have been increasing day by day. A minor border conflict with Poland could lead to escalation at any time. *Secondly*, the conflict with Belarus deepens the rifts in already difficult Russo-Polish relations. *Thirdly*, tendencies for Warsaw, Vilnius, and Riga to drift apart from Brussels could be reinforced, which would prevent the development of a consensual EU neighborhood policy toward Belarus and Russia. Ultimately, the economic security of Germany and the EU depends to a large extent on Russian energy supplies crossing Belarussian territory, and the planned Baltic gas pipeline will not change that in any significant way.

Recommendations for Action

Coordination between the EU and Russia on neighborhood policy toward Belarus. The EU should put the issue of Belarus on its agenda with Russia. Chairmanship of the G-8 brings with it for Russia not least the duty to understand its “strength” and “sovereignty” as responsibilities.

Germany must assert its *special responsibility* as Poland’s EU neighbor and Russia’s partner in such a policy coordination process. Above all, the bilateral Russo-German summits must be used more intensively than before to address the conflict.

Like the Orange Revolution, this conflict again exposes the dramatic *need for coordination in the Common Foreign and Security Policy*. The European Union’s neighborhood policy in eastern Europe needs to be fine-tuned, drawing on the experience of Poland and Lithuania and agreeing a joint approach.

The EU should seriously consider the offer of *mediation in dialogue* between Warsaw and Minsk made by Ukrainian President Yushchenko in Gdansk. From the Ukrainian perspective this represented a gesture of gratitude to Poland and the

European Union for their mediation during the Orange Revolution.

The repertoire of diplomatic protest should for the moment continue to be exploited to the full—for example summoning the Belarussian ambassadors in the EU states if the conflict drags on and escalates. Economic sanctions would have severe consequences for Belarus. The EU Commission is currently weighing up such a course of action—temporarily suspending the EU’s Generalized System of Preferences and the import duty exemptions that go with it—in response to neglect of workers’ rights in Belarus. Sanctions would, however, not be advisable if they would harm the weak small and medium-sized business sector in Belarus.

Continuing involvement of Belarus in European communication processes. Efforts to build a civil society and develop a free media sector should be continued. Critical dialogue should continue to be sought with those sections of the Belarussian elites that are open to it. The next opportunity for this will be offered by the VIIIth Minsk Forum on “Germany and Belarus: European Neighbors: Foreign Policy, Economy, Society.”

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ISSN 1861-1761