



Assisting Democratic Transition in Belarus: Lessons from Pre-1989 Poland

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The outcome of the Belarusian elections of March 19, 2006 opens up the prospects of a prolonged struggle between Lukashenka's dictatorial regime and the forces of democratic opposition and politically awakened parts of the civil society. In view of the brutal repression of protesters against the fraudulent elections and anyone daring to challenge the regime, the question arises as to what will be the best tactics and strategies for pro-democracy activists and their supporters in the West.

The degree of repressiveness of the Lukashenka regime, its methods combining soft and hard power, eludes comparison with pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine. Indeed, some Belarusian activists are inclined to draw comparisons between the situation in Belarus and Poland after martial law was imposed in late 1981. This article will examine such comparisons more closely, and will reflect on useful lessons that can be drawn from the struggle of Poland's "Solidarity" movement by those who wish to see a free, democratic and Western-oriented Belarus. Such comparisons will also provide clues as to instruments of democratic assistance that could effectively be applied by those wishing to support democracy in Belarus.

Let Them Know the World is Watching!

The imposition of martial law in Poland sent shockwaves around the world, even though reactions from the democratic world were less than consistent. Strong condemnation by US President Ronald Reagan of the unfolding drama were accompanied by complicity in Western Europe, best exemplified by "the sigh of relief" from German chancellor Helmut Schmidt upon hearing the news that "Solidarity has been prevented from starting the third World War". This seems to sum up the way that pro-democratic activists perceived and remembered the world's reactions: words of encouragement from the US and opportunism on the part of German and other European politicians, preoccupied with the concern "not to wake the Russian bear".

The pro-Americanism of the Polish post-1989 elites, so difficult to understand to politicians and opinion makers of "old Europe", can to a large extent be traced back to those reactions to the banning of "Solidarity" and the imprisonment of its activists. European leaders should draw a lesson from this: strong criticism of the Lukashenka regime today is an investment in good relations with the future leaders of Belarus.

In view of the fact that the EU is emerging as a regional political (and not merely economic) centre of gravity, the key responsibility here falls on European institutions and the capitals of those member states that – in the public eye – are most closely associated with Europe, such as Germany. The imprisoned and persecuted democracy activists in Belarus have every right to expect a clear and unambiguous voice of support from Europe, and they will certainly reciprocate as democratic politicians in the future.

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It is very encouraging to see the involvement of a number of new member states, most notably Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, in supporting democracy in Belarus. In addition to conducting their own activities, these countries should combine their efforts in order to mobilize other EU players. No less important is the involvement of non-member states of the EU, such as Ukraine and Georgia, whose own experience with recent democratic change should be tapped to build broad-based international support for Belarus.

Such assistance also needs to go beyond vague statements about supporting the “democratic process in Belarus”. What is needed is general recognition of Alyaksandr Milinkevich and other opposition leaders as genuine representatives of the other, the democratic Belarus. Here another Polish experience can come in handy. The award of the Nobel peace prize to Lech Walesa increased the visibility of the “Solidarity” struggle at a time when the world was beginning to shift its attention away from Poland. Likewise, it should be ensured that concrete names and faces of Belarusian opposition leaders remain in the focus of any policy related to Belarus. All gestures of recognition by governments as well as by international and civic organizations are welcome and important.

“Fanning the Flames of Freedom”

It will be important to make sure that the recent high levels of international attention do not give way to a “Belarus fatigue” by the democratic world. It would, therefore, be advisable for the EU to undertake regular monitoring activities on the situation in Belarus, publish regular reports and statements and perhaps appoint a high ranking rapporteur charged with day to day assessment of developments in the country.

Keeping Belarus and pro-democracy activists domestically and internationally visible and recognized is also a task for the international media and foreign diplomats residing in Minsk. Poland’s experience under martial law suggests that the ability to speak to foreign correspondents was an important political asset for “Solidarity” activists. This was not only a way to criticize and embarrass the regime vis-à-vis an international audience, but also a way to communicate with the Polish society through the Polish-language radio programs, such as Radio Free Europe, BBC, Voice of America, Radio France Internationale and others. This established a communication circuit, alternative to the official media, whose accessibility went well beyond the politically awakened segments of society to those who were not willing to directly challenge the regime and yet wanted to have access to information banned from government-controlled media. Reaching out to such an audience, and breaking the “Lukashenka spell” over parts of the Belarusian society, is a crucial task for democracy activists. International media presence and interest in developments in Belarus deserve encouragement.

Foreign embassies should also become meeting spaces and resource centers for the opposition and certain segments of the society, such as students. In Poland under martial law, the American embassy was a place where one could read Western press and books, as well as watch CNN. Despite the regime’s efforts to discourage the users of the library facilities, it was broadly used and served as an important channel of information. Both the American library and the British Council served as “windows on the West”, and embassies in Minsk should strive to provide as many such windows as possible in Belarus today.

The embassies in Minsk should also remain open for democracy activists. Inviting the oppositionists to all formal and informal events organized by embassies (such as national holidays, conferences, etc.) should become the rule rather than the exception. This is not only a way of increasing the recognition and legitimacy of those activists, but also a way of creating a meeting ground for the opponents of the regime and its representatives. Providing such a channel of communication between the two sides of the conflict may help part of the *nomenklatura* to develop acquaintance with “the enemy” and thus prepare possible future interactions and “round tables”.

“Actions Speak Louder than Words”

Certainly, more is needed and should be expected than strong words. The scale of the repression following the protests against the elections is clear grounds for sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. The most obvious instrument of sanctions is a visa ban to the EU, and the recent EU decision to expand the blacklist from its current six to possibly four hundred names of people involved in repressions is a start in this respect, however inadequate. For comparison, it is estimated that 40,000 foreign persons are currently blacklisted by the Belarus authorities, including politicians, journalists, experts and NGO activists. The EU should use the principle of reciprocity to expand its blacklist to a similar level. It should insist that the visa ban covers entire categories of regime officials, including police, special-forces, civil servants in some ministries, in other words, all the groups without whose support the regime would not last a fortnight. Moreover, the visa ban should also affect the immediate family members of officials. To achieve EU consensus on such a radical move will not be easy and will take time but as a first impulse in this direction, individual countries, such as Lithuania, Poland and possibly Ukraine, could unilaterally expand the blacklist to a level where it could make a difference.

The visa ban should provide a powerful incentive for the *nomenklatura* to reconsider their support for Lukashenka. They should not be able to enjoy open borders but keep the rest of society locked up under an authoritarian system. At the same time, the EU border regime has to be kept friendly and permeable for the ordinary citizens of Belarus. From this point of view, recent proposals to raise visa fees to 60 Euros after the impending expansion of the Schengen area to include new EU member states are very unfortunate, since it would make even short trips to Poland and Lithuania unaffordable to most Belarusians.

Depending on the further development of the domestic situation in Belarus, the imposition of economic sanctions should not be ruled out. While it is true that the regime would try to use the sanctions as a propaganda tool against the West, again judging by Polish experience, such propaganda is not necessarily effective. American sanctions against Poland after the imposition of martial law did not cause an upsurge of anti-Americanism. On the contrary, official posters denouncing Ronald Regan’s “crusade against Poland” became cult-objects and were quickly snatched up by collectors. The imposition of sanctions may have had a limited economic impact but was an important symbolic signal to opponents of the communist regime.

In the case of Belarus, the economic sanctions should be targeted against the companies closely associated with, and subsidizing, the current regime. The growing dependence of Belarus on trade with the EU, especially in oil and natural gas derivatives, makes this country susceptible to economic pressure. Such targeted sanctions would hurt the regime and *nomenklatura* more than ordinary citizens. In depriving the regime of much-needed revenues, economic sanctions will make it difficult for Lukashenka’s government to uphold the façade of economic stability and prosperity that is so effectively portrayed in official propaganda.

In turn, the large scale of protests and repression following the March 19 elections also necessitate an increase in direct assistance to victims of repression and their families. Important and needed support includes scholarships for studies abroad for those students who were banned from Belarusian universities for their civic activism. Special “advanced studies” fellowships should be provided for academics unable to continue their work in Belarus for political reasons. Such students and scholars could be affiliated with EU universities but also with policy think-tanks, where they could work on public policy analysis and development. In building necessary expertise, such work will be crucial once the democratic breakthrough is achieved in Belarus

Information Channels: Creating Alternatives to Government-Controlled Media

One of the striking features of the Polish democratic opposition in the 1980's was the degree to which it could challenge the regime's media monopoly. The diversity of printed information material (from leaflets to lengthy volumes) made it possible to reach different target groups, and the diversity of different independent sources and channels of information was difficult to suppress. The underground press was also a school of independent journalism and seriously contributed to the development of free media in Poland after 1989, with *Gazeta Wyborcza* as the most spectacular, yet not unique example.

Technological progress since the 1980's should make the supply of independent information easier and assistance in this area to democratic activists in Belarus needs to be a priority. New technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, should be used to the fullest, while "old-fashioned" print materials, such as leaflets or newspapers, must not be forgotten to reach the less technology-aware segments of society.

Two more aspects of the Polish experience with alternative media are worth stressing here. Firstly, one should keep in mind that the influence of clandestine print media was magnified through foreign radio broadcasts to Poland, which duly reported the contents of such publications and made them accessible to a broader audience. This also means that new broadcasting initiatives for Belarus should, to a larger extent than to date, rely on informational materials produced by Belarusians inside the country. In so doing, such broadcasts would be perceived as Belarusian programs from abroad rather than EU, Polish or Lithuanian broadcasts in the Belarusian language.

The second important lesson from the Polish struggle for information in the 1980's is that although the government monopoly in electronic media (especially TV) cannot be broken, its credibility can be greatly reduced by concerted efforts of the opposition. In Poland under martial law there were a number of initiatives of this type, and the slogan *Telewizja kłamie!* ("Television lies!") was familiar even to the most politically passive Poles. The slogan was popularized through leaflets, graffiti and stickers on trams and busses. Other initiatives, such as the act of individual citizens to put their TV sets in the windows of their apartments or conspicuous "TV walks" during official evening news broadcasts further weakened the spell of state propaganda. Convincing the average Belarusian citizen that what they see on TV is not necessarily what really happened will be crucial to winning the propaganda war against Lukashenka.

Instruments of Assistance: Flexibility, Pluralism and Decentralization

Polish "Solidarity" has often been described as a *sui generis* movement which, judged by political criteria, was at the same time socialist, liberal and conservative. The hybrid ideological nature of "Solidarity" made it easier to seek and find supporters in various places in Poland and outside, among people with very different ideological inclinations, from conservatives to anarchists, from Western trade unions to the Reagan Republicans. Therefore, it is advisable to build the broadest-possible support for the cause of democracy in Belarus across the political and ideological spectrum in the EU and the US. This also implies that assistance should be provided by a broad variety of institutions, both national and supranational.

The US is and will long remain the country with the most experience, will and resources in the field of assisting democracy. However, in view of the controversies surrounding US attempts to establish democracy in Iraq as well as suspicions towards America among the populations of the former Soviet Union, which had long been subdued by

anti-American propaganda, it is necessary to expand the basis of support for pro-democracy activists. The EU and individual member states can and should be more pro-active in assisting democrats in Belarus, beyond the European response to date that has remained below expectations. As if believing that “if you break it you own it”, some European leaders seem hesitant to take the responsibility for encouraging democratic transformation in Belarus. The example of Ukraine, where the spectacular victory of the Orange Revolution was also a clear “European choice” of its citizens, demonstrates that once democracy prevails in Belarus, its citizens too will start knocking on EU doors. At present this seems to be something many in the EU would rather avoid.

Although the recent eastward enlargement was the biggest-ever EU success in strengthening new democracies, prospects for countries such as Ukraine or eventually Belarus to enjoy similar EU support are limited, if not absent altogether. The European (Union) Neighborhood Policy, created as an alternative to enlargement for countries without clear prospects of membership, is hardly appropriate for effectively assisting democracy in Belarus and elsewhere. Clearly, new instruments are needed.

The idea of establishing a European Democracy Fund deserves both attention and support. Such a foundation should focus on assisting democracy activists under adverse conditions and should, therefore, be based on the principle of maximum flexibility. It should be staffed with people with broad field experience, rather than Eurocrats. For this reason, the new foundation should be established and overseen by the European Parliament rather than the European Commission, and it should work closely with NGOs in those member states, which have a demonstrable track record in building democracy at home in recent years. This experience, especially strong in new EU member states, should be tapped for assisting democrats in Belarus and beyond.

Another, and complementary rather than competing, idea is to allow factions of the European Parliament to establish political foundations, along the lines of the German party foundations (Konrad Adenauer, Friedrich Ebert, Heinrich Böll, etc.) or the American National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute. Their primary objective should be to consolidate the EU-wide political party scene, and an additional task would be to work with democratic parties outside the EU, in an effort to project European political values, strengthen democratic discourse, and influence the policy agendas of their counterparts in new and fledgling democracies.

Conclusion: Keep Europe Open

The collapse of communism in Europe in 1989 surprised most Sovietologists, who thought that they would spend a lifetime trying to fathom the outcome of the power struggles in the Soviet politburo by studying the line-up of party apparatchiks during May 1 parades. Somewhat in a similar vein, albeit less spectacularly, the international community was taken by surprise by the pace of events and the degree of societal mobilization during the Orange Revolution. Likewise in Belarus, and the recent March elections already provided a glimpse, the victory of democracy may be closer than we think even when the forces of the regime seem overwhelming. This is why, while trying to be as realistic as possible in evaluating the chances of success of the democratic opposition in Belarus, we should also prepare plans and scenarios for the day after Lukashenka.

In fact, the first lesson from democratic revolutions, more recently in Ukraine, more remote already in Poland, is that democratic forces and their partners abroad can never be sufficiently prepared for taking over responsibility for a country. The case of post-revolutionary Ukraine should be a warning. The victors of the Orange Revolution failed to move quickly to consolidate their victory by implementing ambitious and far-reaching political and economic reforms. Similarly, the reaction of the Western democracies, which enthusiastically welcomed the outburst of civic activism in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities,

has been disappointing when it came to assisting Ukrainians in their European choice. The icy silence as regards EU membership prospects for Ukraine from most European capitals and the failure to liberalize visa restrictions for travel to the EU (a relatively simple and effective method of “rewarding” Ukrainians for making a good choice) are a testimony to the political opportunism, lack of political vision and leadership failure haunting Europe today.

In this respect, Poland was certainly more fortunate than Ukraine. Not only did Leszek Balcerowicz introduce his reforms while social support for the first non-communist government was at its height, but also reactions from both Europe and America were unambiguous: they indicated clearly that the West was keen to see a democratic, stable and European Poland. As early as 1991, for example, visas were abolished for Poles and other Central Europeans to travel throughout Europe without restrictions. In 1993 already Poland negotiated and signed its association agreement with the EU and unilaterally declared its intent to join this organization. The EU action plan for Ukraine, by contrast, was hardly even modified in the wake of Yushchenko’s victory, and any membership prospects, however vague and remote, fell on deaf ears in the European Council, the European Commission and national capitals in the EU.

For Belarus, one can only hope that the West and especially Europe, follows the path it took in the case of Poland. It is of the utmost importance that a strategy for assisting democratic transition in Belarus includes generous EU and US support for the democratic opposition struggling with Lukashenka but also a vision, plans and offers for the day after Europe’s last dictator is removed from power. 25 years after the creation of the “Solidarity” movement in Poland, Europe was celebrating the first anniversary of EU membership of eight former communist countries. Their transformation from communist dictatorships to countries characterized by democracy, respect for human rights, and functioning market economies is one of the most spectacular recent achievements of European integration and transatlantic cooperation. This success should encourage democrats in Europe and in the West more broadly to design effective assistance for those still struggling to achieve democracy in Belarus and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.