



David Marples, Manfred Sapper

"Europe's last dictatorship": A self-fulfilling prophecy

An interview with David Marples

Lukashenka's departure from the path of liberalization required by the EU's Eastern Partnership programme suggests Russian pressure, says David Marples. The Belarusian president may have been able to dispose of political opponents, but the country's economic weakness poses a more elusive threat to the stability of his regime.

Manfred Sapper: How do you assess what took place in Belarus during the election on 19 December 2010 and what has happened there since then?

David Marples: Essentially, after a rigged election, when official polls suggested the president winning with a percentage that was about twice his real standing, thousands of people took to the streets to protest. The regime then opted to crack down on its opponents in the severest manner possible, using riot police, special forces and the KGB — and according to some reports, with the army as a back-up force. The official reason was that several presidential candidates, their aides and supporters attempted to incite mass riots in Independence Square, having moved there after an initial gathering on October Square, and break into the Parliament building. Several candidates had announced earlier the formation of what was termed the "Government of National Salvation" and decided to speak to government ministers and members of the Central Election Commission, which had its headquarters in the Parliament building. However, no ministers appeared to be present on the night of 19 December and early hours of 20 December. Since then, the government has rounded up or harassed all known opposition leaders, attempted to shut down or silence websites, and put pressure on most opposition newspapers and independent television and radio outlets. More than 20 of the 600 plus arrested after the demonstration are still being held in KGB cells, often under appalling conditions and without regular access to their lawyers or — in some cases — to necessary medical treatment. Over 35 are being charged under the riot act, which carries a prison sentence of 5 to 15 years.

MS: Was the admission of opposing candidates and their television appearances prior to the election purely tactical, or the sign of a liberalisation that has now been hastily terminated?

DM: I believe that the television appearances were a purely tactical measure by the regime, just like the release of Alyaksandr Kazulin, the imprisoned presidential candidate from the 2006 presidential election, in 2008. The reality is that in two successive elections, opposition candidates and their teams have been assaulted, beaten, arrested, and accused of various criminal offences. In

2001 the only reason the same thing did not happen was that purges were carried out in 1999–2000, when virtually all major opponents were silenced, and several kidnapped and presumably murdered. Others, like the leader of the United Civic Party (Karpenka), died in suspicious circumstances or fled abroad (e.g. Sharetsky, formerly the chairman of the parliament). Lukashenka essentially has not changed and cannot change. He is vindictive to the extent that anyone who challenges him will ultimately be punished. The sight of a presidential candidate (Nyaklayeu) laying on the street bleeding even before the elections are officially over could be a fitting symbol of the nature of this populist but cruel and even vicious regime. Nothing has changed other than the views of some European politicians.

MS: Why did the Lukashenka regime react with such severity? Is it the consequence of a change in the balance of power within the Belarusian elite? Or did the repression lead to such a shift in the balance of power?

DM: I don't see any change in the balance of power within the Belarusian elite. The only source of power in Belarus is the president. That has not changed. Rather than an elite, what one sees is an interchangeable ruling group in which leading figures tend to rotate, such as Myasnikovich, Sheiman and even Lukashenka's son Viktor. The first question cannot be answered definitively at this time and one can only make educated guesses as to why the response was so severe. I would posit another question: who gained from the repressions carried out in the aftermath of the election? Clearly Belarus' relationship with the European Union suffered, as many analysts have pointed out. But if the attack on parliament was staged — there is ample evidence to suggest that it was — then what was the reason? And if the alleged goal of the opposition leaders Statkevich, Sannikau, Rymasheuski and Mikhalevich was to change the regime, then why have they not been accused of treason, but rather only the lesser Article 238, i.e. inciting riots? The result inevitably was to undermine ties with Europe, which would suggest that Belarus and Russia might have made common cause, following the private meeting of Lukashenka and Medvedev to resolve major outstanding differences on 9 December in Moscow. In other words, it is possible that there was an understanding between the two leaderships over what might occur on 19 December, but it would also depend on what the opposition decided to do as well. The Charter 97 website had advertised the planned protest for some time, but had also suggested that the response to a rigged election would be a strike protest, not a "Government of National Salvation".

MS: Who are the people responsible for the repression besides Lukashenka?

DM: One would have to point to the leaders of the various agencies — the police, the KGB, etc. They followed orders, which were carefully laid out prior to the 19 December elections. It doesn't really matter whether EU sanctions are applied to one man or 37 associates. That the riot police carried out their task with particular severity might be worth considering, but ultimately prominent politicians have a choice whether or not to serve this president and cooperate with his actions, and that includes all of them, from Foreign Minister Martynau to the head of the presidential administration Makei. By participating in the government up to and after 19 December, they are collaborators in the repressive actions.

MS: What will be the foreign policy consequences for Belarus's relations with Russia, where Lukashenka was harshly attacked on television before the election?

DM: Belarus will likely move closer to Russia as a willing or unwilling partner. The crackdown after the elections benefited Russia more than Belarus because it ended, temporarily at least, the orientation of Minsk toward Brussels, or a multi-vectored foreign policy that included the EU, more or less as an equal partner with Moscow. Russia does not look at the geostrategic situation from the same perspective as Brussels or the United States. It sees the Near Abroad rather as a sort of chessboard where pieces have to be moved carefully, but with heavy priority on neighbours like Belarus and (especially) Ukraine. After the fall of the "Orange" presidency of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine early in 2010, Belarus became the priority issue, but Lukashenka resisted, mainly because he did not like playing the puppet to Kremlin masters. However, the psychological makeup of Lukashenka and Putin is not very different: they both understand power games. Russia perceives Belarus as a legitimate sphere of interest as regards other powers, but it also needs Belarus and Ukraine as gateways for transit of energy resources to Europe (for now anyway). Gazprom and other Russian companies have also made significant inroads into the Belarusian economy, gaining control or part-control of key companies (Beltransgaz is the most notable example). Russia today (by which I mean the Medvedev-Putin leadership rather than the population as a whole) is in a better position after the elections in Belarus: not only has it achieved its desired result — a victory for Lukashenka — but also the pro-European direction of Belarusian foreign policy has been seriously undermined. However, for Lukashenka, the latter was always only a tactical manoeuvre; it did not indicate any real commitment to the EU, and especially not to the expressed values of the EU countries and their leaders.

MS: The collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago has shown that the stability of authoritarian regimes is easily overestimated. What are the Belarusian regime's sources of stability? How stable *is* the regime?

DM: The main source of stability for Belarus has been its general economic performance over the past 10–15 years, which was generally positive. A second factor has been the popularity of the president, which was relatively high for much of that time as well. However, the source of the prosperity was the ability of the Belarusians to exploit the largesse of Moscow, in the shape of subsidized prices for energy resources. By refining and reselling oil, state-owned Belarusian companies could make substantial profits. This situation ended a few years ago when Gazprom demanded that Belarus pay market prices for imported gas, and Russian oil companies followed its example. Since then Belarus has borrowed heavily from various sources, especially from Russia and the International Monetary Fund, to meet its budgetary needs. If Russia's conditions are heavy — pressure to participate in Russian led bodies such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and eventually to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia — the IMF's are barely less stringent: the regime would be forced to curb spiralling wages and perhaps even to cut pensions, which would be very unpopular moves. Lukashenka has also courted the Chinese — partly, one suspects, to demonstrate to the Russians that he has alternative sources of funding. These factors, as well as the popular reaction to another fabricated election result, indicate that the Lukashenka regime is less stable than at any time over the past 16 years. It is weaker vis-à-vis Russia and has alienated most European states, which had been prepared to close their eyes to the many violations of human rights in the hope that Belarus would emerge as a potential partner.

MS: How do you assess the reaction of the West, the EU and international organizations such as the OSCE?

DM: In general, I think the reactions have demonstrated that the EU and OSCE have experienced a reality check regarding the nature of the Lukashenka regime. This is not to say that engagement is, in principle, a bad policy, just that it has not worked. Having closed the door to the EU as a result of its actions during and after the elections, Belarus now has to engage with Russia. So when adopting some sort of punitive response to the crackdown in Minsk and elsewhere, the West must recognize that it reflected a number of factors and cannot be simply dismissed as a war between Lukashenka and the opposition. On the one hand, it reflects the president's genuine anger at a popular challenge to his power; but on the other, it demonstrates his predicament, in that he has now been dragged back into the Moscow orbit. He cannot, in my view, have been so stupid as to repress his opponents in this fashion without some sort of external pressure on him, and that pressure must have come from the Russian side, either directly or psychologically. Looked at logically, if Medvedev said to Lukashenka that Belarus' participation in the Common Economic Space and CSTO precluded an active role in the Eastern Partnership, then that cut off an escape route used for the previous two years. But it also offered an opportunity to consolidate his power and get rid of several irritants like Sannikau and Nyaklayeu, the Charter 97 website and so on, since the European response no longer mattered to the same degree as before. What will be interesting to see is whether Belarus will now recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states — especially in light of the otherwise inexplicable endorsement of Lukashenka's election victory by Saakashvili. That would indicate that the defiant Lukashenka has truly been subdued. The OSCE has experienced the severing of its mandate before, after the end of the tenure of Hans-Georg Wieck in the late 1990s. Once again, one sees repetition in Belarusian policies.

MS: What kind of scenarios do you envision for Belarus?

DM: Lukashenka's tactics are quite familiar. He will use the political prisoners as bargaining chips, as he has done in the past. Sannikau and Nyaklayeu will get sentences of between five and ten years. If there are international protests — as surely there would be — his attitude will be: what's in it for me? A major loan, a new suspension of the anticipated travel ban, an end to the Schengen visa regime? Poland has stated that it will provide aid to and deal with the opposition directly. However, the Lukashenka regime will likely try to divide and rule the opposition. It has already commenced such a path with its approach to Ramanchuk to join the government and to denounce his fellow candidates for moving to Independence Square. In short, Belarus will be as demanding and obdurate as ever in its dealings with the EU. However, because of its trade and other links with the EU, it does not wish to cut off relations and is reliant on prominent European statespersons wishing to pursue the engagement strategy, no matter what the cost. Some politicians and analysts believe that Lukashenka is a sort of bulwark preventing the spread of Russian influence westward. This is naive nonsense. The removal of Lukashenka is the essential first step in any real movement of Belarus on a democratic path, and that has been obvious for some time. That is more likely to be achieved *with* Russian help than without. Russia, in any case, cannot be left out of the equation and it is more important that there be regime change in Belarus than a move to democracy in the Russian Federation, because that is easier to achieve.

Russia, meanwhile, will continue its strategy of pursuing the integration of Belarus into Eurasian structures that are dominated by Russia, using persuasion and threats — particularly on energy prices and potential aid to the

nascent nuclear power programme in Belarus. Lukashenka will first seek to eliminate all sources of opposition influence and then permit some lesser forms to exist, such as NGOs or parties that do not oppose his presidency. In other words, he will allow some token dissidence. However, the achievement of the opposition candidates in 2010 is clear. They reached out to the population in the short time available and attracted large audiences to hear critical assessments of the regime. Independent polls suggested that about one-third of the electorate supported opposition candidates on the eve of the election, equal to or higher than support for Lukashenka. So there is room for some optimism in an otherwise gloomy picture.

Lastly, although the existing opposition is fractured and beaten down, it is not cowed. It has the capacity to unite, provided that a meaningful strategy is adopted that recognizes several factors:

- That the population of Belarus remains fearful of widespread privatization and the sort of policies demanded by the IMF. It has become accustomed to the security of a patrimonial state and that attitude will take time to change.
- The sort of economic stability attained by Lukashenka is to some extent illusory and of short duration. But it is the key factor in the thinking of the electorate.
- Most people living in Belarus want the country to remain independent. They are not committed to alliances either in Europe or Russia. A form of civic nationalism has been created and sustained in Belarus quite successfully, and not only by the government but also by grassroots organizations.
- On the other hand, most people in Belarus do not perceive Russia as the enemy, or the Russian language as something foreign. They do not see any serious differences as people between themselves and Russians. The opposition needs to take these factors into account — as indeed Sannikau and Nyaklayeu did during the campaign.
- Nevertheless, most Belarusians see themselves as Europeans too. In short, no form of partisan policy is going to work with the Belarusian electorate. The country needs to work with partners to the east and the west, but as an independent voice. So the opposition needs a bipartisan strategy, a form of political movement that is appealing to all sectors of the population and with a meaningful policy for future relations with Russia and the European Union. Of course at the moment this seems far-fetched, with leaders in dungeons and widespread arrests, but it is not impossible. Moreover, the system of political parties, as they are currently framed, is unappealing to the populace and have been largely discredited by official propaganda. Something new is needed.
- The first step, however, must be the removal of Lukashenka, whose regime has become a self-fulfilling prophecy in an attempt to become the last dictatorship of Europe. It wasn't a true dictatorship before 2010, and may not be now, since it cannot control every facet of public life in a globalized and highly educated society. But it has taken a very significant step in this direction.

*Parts of this interview can also be read in a longer roundtable discussion published in German in **Osteuropa** 12/2010: "Der Fall Belarus. Gewalt, Macht, Ohnmacht".*

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