

A Post-Election Agenda for Belarus

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In an election last month marred by widespread allegations of fraud, opposition protests, and a violent government crackdown, Aleksandr Lukashenka once again claimed a landslide victory in his bid to retain the presidency of Belarus. Following victories in 1994, 2001, and 2006—the last enabled by a constitutional change to remove term limits—this election's outcome continues Lukashenka's dominance of the country's politics, despite a pre-election reform trend that enabled greater opposition activity. The onus is now squarely back on Moscow, Washington, and Brussels to respond to the election's most immediate and troubling consequences—the imprisonment of hundreds of demonstrators and opposition activists—while setting a course for future relations with this mid-sized state occupying a key strategic location among Russia, NATO, and the EU.

Thus far, Russia's president and other former Soviet leaders have quietly congratulated Lukashenka for his victory, while Western leaders have strongly condemned the violence, and a few states, notably Poland, have expanded their ties with the Belarusian opposition. But the looming question for Western leaders is whether to revive tough sanctions and close the door on engagement with the Lukashenka regime, or to seek a solution that will undo the direst post-election abuses while leaving open the possibility of future re-engagement. Belarus, too, is at an inflection point—it can choose to salvage what remains of its pre-election reform agenda, or it may empower those at home, in Russia, and in the West who oppose the country's closer ties with Europe.

Strategic Options

In the West, Lukashenka has been labeled “Europe's last dictator,” and targeted trade and travel sanctions have been in place since the middle of the last decade in response to arrests of Belarusian opposition figures. Yet since 2008, the European Union had softened its stance and offered Minsk a pathway to normalized relations through participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership, which includes promotion of European democratic norms.

Brussels had made it clear that the recent election was an opportunity for Belarus to demonstrate its commitment to moving in the direction of basic democratic principles, and Minsk had hoped the process would be deemed more free and fair by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Instead, international observers found that the process lacked transparency and

failed to live up to OSCE standards, and the post-election violence and crackdown impaired any residual sense of progress (full disclosure: Rojansky served on the OSCE observer mission).


Relations between Minsk and Moscow have also been in flux. Lukashenka's ties with Russian president Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s resulted in energy and other bilateral trade terms extremely favorable to Minsk, plus creation of the nominal Russia-Belarus union state, of which Lukashenka hoped to become president. But with Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin in 2000, Russia became far less willing to subsidize the ambitions of its smaller neighbor, and the past decade has witnessed a general downturn in relations, exacerbated by bitter energy price wars between the two countries.

In the run-up to the December election, a series of anti-Lukashenka programs ran on Russian state-controlled television, which has a large market share in Belarus, and the Kremlin gave tacit backing to several opposition candidates. A few days before the vote, however, with the election outcome handwriting on the wall, Moscow and Minsk struck a new gas pricing deal, signaling a possible truce.


Despite suspicion and enmity from the East and West, Lukashenka enjoys strong, even if diminished, support at home. A range of Belarusians-especially state employees and pensioners who have benefitted from his “sharing the wealth” of gas subsidies-speak openly about their support for the president, whom they often call *batka* (father). The Belarusian opposition, despite its prominent role in the post-election protests, remains weak, its leaders distrustful of one another, lacking a clear program or message, and largely unfamiliar to people outside the cities. As a result, even without manipulating the polls, Lukashenka remains for the present the only figure capable of mustering nationwide support.

Lukashenka remains popular because he represents stability in uncertain times. Compared with its much larger neighbors Russia and Ukraine, Belarus has grown with less tumult. Income inequality is less extreme, employment is virtually guaranteed, health care remains available, pensions are paid on time, and other basic social services are largely available for all citizens. The price for these comforts is the lack of political pluralism or opportunity for the country's talented people. It is a bargain reminiscent of the old Soviet system, but without pervasive ideology or global pretensions.

Like the Soviet system, however, Belarus is on an unstable footing. Since independence, the national economy has relied on an uneven exchange with Russia, in which Belarus gave false political allegiance and gained real economic benefits: access to Russia's vast market, and discounted gas and crude oil, which it then refined and re-exported to Western Europe at a profit. After years of bickering over energy prices, Moscow and Minsk recently agreed on a below-market rate in exchange for sharing export revenues-but there is no guarantee the deal will hold.



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The Kremlin has expressed repeated annoyance with Lukashenka for obstructing its agenda in the post-Soviet space: refusing to recognize the separatist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, providing safe haven to ousted Kyrgyz strongman Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and conspiring to reverse the flow of Ukraine's Odessa-Brody pipeline. When the Russian subsidies disappear, Minsk will be forced either to cut social benefits-risking domestic backlash-or sell off state enterprises, an opportunity that Kremlin-backed Russian oligarchs will be well positioned to exploit.

There is, of course, another path for Belarus. At least until the elections, relations with Europe had been on the mend, thanks largely to the recognition by Brussels that it needs real partnership with the EU's "eastern neighborhood," and that past coercive diplomacy toward Minsk was not delivering results. The opaque process and post-election violence may have blunted Europe's highest hopes, but the election is unlikely to change Brussels' preference for "soft conditionality" and engagement over a renewed bout of sanctions. Despite their strong statements of condemnation after the rigged vote and violence in Minsk, European leaders know that isolation and pressure will not yield reforms, and is instead very likely to hurt average Belarusians and push Lukashenka closer to the Kremlin.

Engagement with Washington has been far more limited, and will remain more challenging. In a meeting with U.S. experts before the election, Lukashenka declared that he is now ready for "full normalization" of relations with the United States. Indeed, Minsk sees the United States as a key arbiter of international legitimacy, and even as a potential security guarantor in case relations with Russia should once again sour. But reviving relations will be possible only if the regime reverses course on the worst of its heavy-handed, post-election tactics, and recommits to a process of domestic reform that will give real opportunities to the country's people.

Like Brussels, Washington recognizes that coercion has failed to pay dividends in the recent past, but after the "reset" with Russia in 2009, the Obama administration is also far less vulnerable to attempts by Lukashenka to play one great power against another. On the other hand, now may be the first time in more than a decade that Minsk could pursue improved relations with both Washington and Moscow.

Is Normalization Still Possible?

If Lukashenka is serious about rapprochement with Washington, he must first undo the direst consequences of the post-election violence by releasing those who have been arrested and providing assurances of their safety. In broader terms, he must recommit to Europe's most enduring common understanding of the principles of shared security-including the human dimension-as embodied in the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris, to which Belarus is a party. This will mean lifting pressure on opposition and civil society groups, playing a productive and stabilizing role in regional and international security, and initiating reforms that will guarantee Belarusians basic political and economic freedoms in the long term.

On nuclear security, Minsk has taken some positive steps, such as the agreement announced by Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton under which Belarus will give up its remaining highly enriched uranium (HEU). This move demonstrates a commitment to the global nuclear nonproliferation regime, an important precedent for other non-nuclear weapons states that possess HEU as well as aspiring peaceful nuclear powers, and has already delivered one token of international appreciation—an invitation for Belarus to participate in the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in South Korea.

Additionally, the United States has suggested it will support Belarus's plan to construct a new nuclear power reactor, enhancing the country's energy security as long as the new reactor operates under full international environmental and nonproliferation safeguards.

Far less progress has been made on the human dimension of security. The elections' troubling result reinforces the impression that Lukashenka must decide swiftly whether to continue gradual movement toward reform or allow the most reactionary elements in his inner circle to clamp down on the opposition once again. On the one hand, the government significantly revised Belarus's election law in 2010 to bring it into closer compliance with OSCE norms, including guaranteeing observers' rights before and during the voting. Likewise, opposition candidates were permitted to register, hold campaign events, and even deliver uncensored remarks attacking the government on state television. However, the conduct of the election itself, particularly the counting and tabulation processes, fell far short of international standards, with almost no opposition representatives on election commissions, reports of opaque and inconsistent counting, and numerous opportunities for fraud in the five-day early voting period.

What happened immediately following the vote has, rightly, provoked harsh reactions from Washington and Europe. Early in the evening of election day, Vladimir Neklyayev, a prominent opposition candidate, was attacked and brutally beaten by unidentified assailants, while he and dozens of his supporters were marching to join a protest rally in the center of Minsk.

The violence continued when special police disbursed a crowd of thousands of opposition supporters gathered on Minsk's Independence Square, some of whom had allegedly begun smashing doors and windows of the adjacent government building housing the central election commission's offices. By the next morning, it was reported that more than half of the opposition candidates, including Neklyayev, had been arrested or simply disappeared, and their campaign headquarters were

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being sealed and searched by the authorities. Although many prisoners have already been released, dozens of opposition leaders remained in prison weeks after the election, and new harassment and abuses have been reported almost daily.

With the election won and the protests quashed, Lukashenka is for the moment in an obvious position of strength domestically, but he will be presented with a clear choice internationally: He can either use his new mandate to restore the pre-election reform trend by releasing all those activists still in prison, relaxing the pressure on groups like Charter 97, the Belarus Christian Democratic party, and Neklyayev's "Speak the Truth" movement, or treating the opposition's challenge to the electoral outcome as a justification for more repressive behavior.

The former course should be sufficient to reopen dialogue with Brussels and Washington, even if the election failed to satisfy Western hopes. The meeting between Secretary Clinton and Minister Martynov in Astana, resulting in the HEU announcement, suggested that while the United States will keep human rights and democracy issues at the forefront of its approach to Belarus, Washington is willing to engage pragmatically with Minsk as long as there is some positive momentum.

On the other hand, if the post-election repression presages future retrogression and an end to the modest reform program, then any hope for normalization of ties with the West in the near term can be abandoned. Even those in Europe and the United States who believe hard conditionality and sanctions will never deliver a positive outcome in Belarus will be unable to justify continued engagement in the face of more abuses.

Minsk will then find its options for attracting outside economic support and capital significantly narrowed, and its longstanding economic dependence on subsidies from Moscow increased. At this point, a return to the way things were before, after the Europeans—particularly the Poles, Germans, and Swedes—have expended significant political capital to enable a thaw, may lead to harsh positions being refrozen, and to Belarus remaining isolated for years to come.

How to Revive Engagement

After Lukashenka's latest relapse, it may be tempting for Western governments to choose the moral high road, severing ties with Minsk, permanently withdrawing incentives for reform, and imposing new penalties. But this approach will do nothing to help the people of Belarus, who will suffer most from sanctions and isolation, but lack the leadership, organization, or resolve to confront their iron-fisted government and force change. If engagement still matters to the authorities in Minsk, it is still the best option for the West to influence events in Belarus, and the path should remain open based on a reversal of the most egregious recent human rights abuses, and a return to pre-election openness for political dialogue and reform.

At a minimum, the government must undo the immediate consequences of the post-election crackdown by releasing prisoners and stopping harassment of opposition leaders. This could at least

“zero the score” and might permit European leaders to dial back their own movement toward renewed sanctions and recommit to the pre-election path of engagement. Until the prisoners are freed, however, there should be no further engagement and no offer of incentives.

In the meantime, to prevent this necessarily tough position from imposing de facto isolation on Belarus, Western governments should redouble their efforts to engage with ordinary citizens. Poland's recently announced approach—which includes elimination of entry visa fees, doubling of aid for independent media and civil society, and opening universities to Belarusian students—is a step in the right direction. Complementary measures from other governments in the region now can help sustain the possibility of greater reengagement with Belarus in the future.

If Lukashenka does truly want normalization with Washington in the longer term, he will have to abandon the expectation that he can bargain between Russia and the West to keep Belarus as an unreformed buffer between the two. To move forward, he must instead address the problems that have drawn American ire in the past, including when sanctions were imposed following the 2006 presidential election. In the run-up to the elections, and for the first time in years, NGOs and political parties were permitted to hold public meetings, distribute literature, and criticize the government. These basic elements of a functional civil society must be allowed and sustained in the future.

Minsk also cannot expect major progress toward normalization with the West until it provides much greater freedom of information to its own people. The West in general took note of the positive trends evident before the election, but has reacted equally to the return of heavy-handed controls. To date, the government has only occasionally restricted Internet access and, as this channel for information and communication becomes more widespread, it will be essential that it remain free.

But the country's print and broadcast media are sadly underdeveloped after years of state control and anemic private-sector competition. Reopening Belarus to global—including foreign-owned—media to report and broadcast without discriminatory regulation, would create a stronger, freer Belarusian press, which can help make the state more responsive to its people and provide greater insulation against political attacks from Kremlin-backed Russian media.

Russian oligarchs may hunger for privatization of Belarus's bloated state industries, expecting to profit as they did during Russia's chaotic Yeltsin-era divestment of state assets. This feeding frenzy



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must not occur, but privatization is still necessary for Belarus's economy to become stable and competitive while the country opens up more fully to European and global markets. Lukashenka's recent presidential decree on lowering barriers to business development is a positive step that may facilitate the overdue process of opening unreformed state-run industries and a bloated public sector to private investment.

Western capital will only be available, though, if the privatization process is transparent, governed by modern legal and tax regimes, with access for outside investors to impartial international arbitration whose results will be respected by Belarusian courts. Such a privatization process will undoubtedly cost some jobs in Belarus as enterprises are restructured to enhance efficiency. However, the proceeds of privatization and better long-term competitiveness will serve Minsk's interests not only in shoring up the state budget, but in resisting further economic dependence on Russia.

Time to Choose

Stability has been the watchword for Belarus under Lukashenka. It must be made clear that reform leading to more normal relations with the West need not mean instability and suffering for average Belarusians. Certainly, structural reform promises greater prosperity for all citizens in the long term, but in the short term, Western governments and the IMF/World Bank can provide financial assistance to help ease the process of change and wean Belarus off reliance on Russian energy subsidies. Belarus is small enough, and Western governments have enough experience with the tragic side effects of “shock therapy” in post-communist states, that they can afford to be generous and patient to make Belarusian reform less painful. But the ball is still certainly in Minsk's court.

Lukashenka and his government are at a moment of strategic choice. The violent post-election crackdown has squandered one critical opportunity for expanded engagement and eventual normalization with the West. Yet for the sake of the people of Belarus, the door should not be closed completely, as long as the government's worst abuses can still be reversed and openings for reform created and developed. With every indication that the Lukashenka regime is secure and its opponents weakened, Minsk still has the chance to salvage its pre-election path of gradual reform and engagement, if it acts to mitigate the worst consequences of the post-election crackdown.

Swift, positive steps by Lukashenka now can still move Belarus toward greater integration with its neighborhood and the wider world, while enhancing its economic security and independence. Yet with each passing week, the possibility of change dims, and the price of isolation grows. Without change, Belarus is on a course to penalize its own people and drastically limit its future international options. Those in Belarus and elsewhere can hope that Lukashenka's fourth term brings the perspective to appreciate this choice.

About the Author

Matthew Rojansky is the deputy director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment. Rojansky is responsible for advancing the Program's strategic priorities, ensuring operational support for resident and visiting experts, and managing relationships with other Carnegie programs, partner institutions, and policy makers. An expert on U.S. and Russian national security and nuclear weapons policies, his work focuses on relations among the United States, NATO, and the states of the former Soviet Union.

From 2007–2010, Rojansky served as executive director of the Partnership for a Secure America (PSA). Founded by former Congressman Lee Hamilton (D-IN) and former Senator Warren Rudman (R-NH), with a group of two dozen former senior leaders from both political parties, PSA seeks to rebuild bipartisan dialogue and productive debate on U.S. national security and foreign policy challenges.

Rojansky is frequently interviewed on TV and radio, and his writing has appeared in the *International Herald Tribune*, *Jerusalem Post*, and *Moscow Times*.

Ambassador James F. Collins is was appointed the director of the Russia and Eurasia Program in January of 2007. He is an expert on the former Soviet Union, its successor states, and on the Middle East.

Ambassador Collins was the U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation from 1997 to 2001. Prior to joining the Carnegie Endowment, he served as senior adviser at the public law and policy practice group Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, LLP.

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