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COMMENT

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Old president, new country > Should Europe expect further change in Belarus?

On December 19 Belarus will elect a new president. The incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, who has remained in power since 1994 and has been labelled in the West as “Europe’s last dictator” is expected to win the race. This is hardly surprising, given the administrative resources of the regime as well as the split in the opposition.

More surprising, perhaps, are the hints that the European Union is going to recognize the outcome of the ballot. A number of top-level EU dignitaries, including German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and European Commissioner Štefan Füle, have recently visited Minsk to discuss cooperation and potential financial support for Belarus, which is a member of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative. Meanwhile, the European Commission is initiating talks on bilateral visa liberalization.

Does this mean, as critics of the policy have suggested, that Europe is simply playing a geopolitical game and that, intent on weakening Russia’s influence in the so-called Common Neighbourhood region, the EU has forgotten all about democratic and market reforms?

The short answer is “no”. The pragmatic one is that the EU is willing to concede that many things have already changed in Belarus and this calls for some political recognition on its part.

Lukashenko’s renewed legitimacy

Satirically speaking, the Belarusian president no longer relies on a coalition of pensioners nostalgic for the USSR and supporters of

socialist-style redistribution. True, these people do exist, but they are no longer the core of his electorate, which, according to independent opinion polls conducted in October, was very close to comprising 50 % of the population—a figure which makes a victory in the first round seem feasible. This momentum is being driven by several factors.

First, a large proportion of the population believe that the government weathered the economic crisis rather well. In September, according to data gathered by the non-governmental Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, 51 % of respondents were of the opinion that the country was moving in the right direction.

Second, and more importantly, Lukashenko no longer looks like an anti-market figure. In recent years he has clearly gained support within the new “middle class” composed of managers and entrepreneurs, which comes as no surprise given that most of them have developed their business under Lukashenko’s rule. Reputable sources bear this out. The World Bank’s “Ease of Doing Business” Ranking 2011 rated Belarus in 68th position, compared with China in 79th place and Russia in 123rd.

Third, Lukashenko’s foreign policy has also evolved dramatically.

On the one hand, he has become an accepted partner of Europe, seizing on the pro-European slogans of the opposition. Moreover, he is a perfect match for those who believe that a hard-fought negotiated partnership with the EU is better than unilateral acceptance of its requests.

On the other hand, he risked an open diplomatic conflict with Russia. He refused to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and resisted Moscow’s attempts to establish control over Belarus’s most precious economic assets, such as its oil refineries. Lukashenko championed the country’s sovereignty and independence, and is now reaping the benefits of the “rally round the flag” effect.

Little place for double standards

The EU should also place Belarus in a wider regional context. If one compares the country with Azerbaijan, for instance, another participant in the “Eastern Partnership”, or with Russia for that matter, Alexander Lukashenko should not appear to be an exception. Ostracizing Minsk while embracing Moscow would only provoke accusations of double standards.

Furthermore, the current presidential campaign has ushered in a significant degree of liberalization.

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Ten people in total were registered as candidates, including prominent opposition figures Andrei Sannikov, Yaroslav Romanchuk and Vladimir Nekliaev, who were given access, albeit limited, to the state broadcast media.

In addition, the OSCE was invited to organize both long-term and short-term monitoring. On November 24, the opposition was even able to stage “rehearsals” for possible post-election mass protests, when two unauthorized meetings were held in Minsk and, contrary to all previous practices, the police made no attempt to disperse the protesters.

What next for the EU?

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that, despite all the progress, Belarus still has a long way to go before approaching standards of democracy that are fully acceptable to Europe. And the EU will have a major role to play in bringing this about.

Brussels will have to present the regime with a list of conditions and benchmarks. Economically, the country is in dire straits, and even if Belarus’s relations with Russia deteriorate no further, Minsk’s interest in having access to Western financial resources will be strong. Economic liberalization is already

underway, and the EU and its member states should use all their instruments to promote European business culture and more transparent rules. Belarusian energy security is a particularly promising field for joint efforts.

But reaching out beyond the regime will be an even stronger challenge. In order for the policy of promoting democratic standards in Belarus to be credible, staying vigilant and reacting strongly to the weakest signs of regression will not suffice. The EU should also succeed in driving home the message to the Belarusian people that their European aspirations, if and when they mature, will be respected, and the country, if it fulfils the conditions, will have a chance to be fully integrated into Europe.

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