Changes in Belarus: The Task for the Opposition, not Foreign Powers

Siarhei Bohdan 24 April 2012

The recent release of two opposition activists is an important event but hardly a turning point for the political situation in Belarus. More than a dozen political prisoners remain incarcerated. Even if Alexandr Lukashenka frees all political prisoners and welcomes EU ministers in Minsk, it will not be a turning point, either.

First, Lukashenka can very soon change his mind, take new prisoners and start the liberalisation game anew. Second, the release of opposition activists taken hostage by the regime may have humanitarian or personal significance but no political impact – as long as they do not undertake real work with people inside Belarus. The fundamental problem is that only three actors play this liberalisation game – the Belarusian regime, Russia and the EU. The Belarusian opposition's role is that of a ball with which they are playing.

Belarusian Opposition: Mission Possible

The reasons for the latest friendly gestures towards West by top officials are the same as before. Worsening of Belarusian relations with EU has narrowed options of Belarusian ruler to a pitiful role of Moscow's vassal. After Putin became the Russian president, he declared his intent to intensify building of Eurasian Union which can be dangerous for Lukashenka's power and survival.

No wonder, the Belarusian leader looked westwards again to return to his older model of multi-vector foreign policy. He is gradually accepting some demands of the EU as in 2008, when he also released political prisoners and began dialogue with the EU. The pressure on the opposition diminished – yet it did not result in strengthening opposition inside the country. Then came the 2010 elections, confrontation and suppression of the opposition within Belarus. The same happened in 2004 and 2006.

The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington
The vicious cycle will repeat again as the interests of stakeholders and power balance on the part of the EU, Russia and Belarusian regime remain the same. The situation can change only when the opposition inside Belarus emerge as an organised and self-conscious force. The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington.

True, Lukashenka's regime blocks many movement of his opponents but there are absolutely no grounds to compare it to Stalin or even Third World dictatorships. Working with the population in Belarus is possible.

Currently, many in the opposition are preoccupied with retaining their financial support without being able to produce any

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The year 2011 demonstrated that the opposition could not organise any serious political campaigns despite widespread anger at government policy displayed by Belarusians because of economic and social problems. The silent protest actions remained spontaneous mob actions without content, and “People's Assemblies” simply failed to attract any considerable numbers of people.

Apparently little has changed in this regard in recent months. The websites of oppositional parties – their main representation platforms given the current situation with media – demonstrate just that. The websites of three major oppositional parties – Belarusian People's Front Party, United Civic Party and Social Democratic Party – resemble internet news sites rather than outlets of political organisations.

Parties usually reprint various news already available elsewhere on Internet and may occasionally publish their own

Of course, topics such as prospects of the Eastern Partnership, the role of the Belarusian People's Republic' government in exile and the Belarusian origins of Scarlett Johansson are very interesting. But they have little to do with the situation in Belarus or the parties' own activities.

The situation looks better with political movements. Both "Tell the Truth" of Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and "For Freedom" of Alaksandr Milinkevich look more dynamic. Their sites demonstrate concrete examples of working with the Belarusians inside the country. "For Freedom" is organising public lectures and "Tell the Truth" is conducting a campaign on the newly proposed Chinese Industrial Park which seriously worries local residents. But their own reported activities still resemble the old parties.

What this means is that the problem of little work with the people have plagued all major oppositional political structures.

Belarusian "Cargo Cult"

That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft
Anthropological insights help to understand activities of Belarusian opposition and society. Some South Pacific islanders, after seeing Western vessels with valuable items arriving to their lands, developed the so called "cargo cult". That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft. That is a pattern to describe activities of Belarusian opposition in recent times.

Activity of most oppositional politicians concentrate on foreign governments and stakeholders. It is assumed that the opposition anyway cannot do anything within the country. That means that they need not undertake any efforts to improve their performance inside Belarus. Instead, the oppositional politicians put pressure on Lukashenka from abroad using the EU. But such behaviour is more likely to produce their further marginalisation inside the country rather that any real, albeit small, change.

The futility of such an approach is evident. The deputy head of the campaign “Tell the Truth” Andrei Dmitryeu speaking to Radio Liberty admitted, “The Belarusian opposition should stop looking for happiness in other capitals. It has to look for happiness here. […] While Belarusian society is not willing to follow the Belarusian opposition, it does not matter what is happening around Belarus.”

Need to Develop An Alternative

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed projects – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones
Tendencies to focus primarily on foreign advocacy lowered efficiency of opposition and their chances to achieve changes within the country. The gap between the opposition and reality in Belarus may end badly for all. Just one example.

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed new initiatives – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones. Mass media in Belarus should become much more vigorous, provide society with independent information about what is going on in the country, and serve as a discussion platform.

For instance, the only Belarusian-language TV channel Belsat is broadcasting original content under extreme pressure put by Belarusian authorities on its journalists in the country. It has much better chances to help changing the situation in Belarus than dozens of websites. Nevertheless, Belsat is chronically underfunded even now.

The opposition will have a hard time getting more money for this kind of projects. Finding money inside Belarus is virtually impossible. For foreign donors supporting real projects directed at Belarusian people could be more expensive and risky than supporting various exile opposition groups or yet another website.

But it is important to understand that only working with Belarusians rather than Brussels insiders can seriously increase respect for the Belarusian opposition. It should appear as a responsible and trustworthy political actor inside the country. Once the public opinion starts to change in the right direction, the question of changing the situation in Belarus will become a question of time.

Otherwise, the cycles of taking and releasing political hostages will be repeated again and again.



Siarhei Bohdan

Siarhei Bohdan is an associate analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre.

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Selling Russian to the Russians

This week the Belarusian Association of Advertisers announced a competition for the best poster in popularising the Belarusian language. They want to draw public attention to "one of the most painful social problems" – the low usage of Belarusian in everyday life in Belarus.

Belarusians have the weakest national self-identification in the former Soviet Union and authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenka is happy to pursue pro-Moscow cultural policy in exchange for cheap Russian gas and oil. The most recent manifestation of such a policy was a letter from the presidential administration urging local authorities "not to allow artificial reduction of the use of the Russian language".

While the authorities are trying to suppress the use of Belarusian, Belarusian civil society is trying to revive it. And for good reason.

Russification Before Independence

The Belarusian language was the only official language of the Grand Duchy of Litva (Lithuania) – once the largest state in Central Europe. But in the last two centuries went through very difficult times.

Since the late 18th century, Russia tried to assimilate Belarusians into the Russian Empire. Mikhail Muravyov who led Russia's administration in the Belarusian territory in the 19th century, famously said: "What Russian rifles did not succeed in doing, will be finished off by Russian schools".

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The modern Belarusian national movement developed relatively late – in the 19th century and in less favourable conditions compared to Baltic states or Ukraine. In 1920 there was a brief period of "Belarusification" in the Soviet Union. Repressive Stalinist totalitarianism ended this short-lived policy and damaged Belarus more than other Soviet republic.

Post-Stalin Soviet leaders continued this policy. Nikita Khrushchev during his visit to Minsk in 1959 stated: "The sooner we all speak in Russian, the faster we build communism". Belarus occupied the last place among all Soviet republics according to the use of its native language. And still it was higher then than today. In 1950, the majority of Minsk residents spoke Belarusian.

Russification After Independence

After the declaration of independence in 1990, the Belarusian Parliament proclaimed the sole official language of the country. But the first Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka was unable to speak either proper Russian, or Belarusian. He spoke a mixture of the two languages with a heavy Belarusian accent.

Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping Lukashenka gain political and economic support from Moscow.
However, he decided to position himself as the defender of the Russian language from Belarusian nationalists. Lukashenka also portrayed the Belarusian language as a real threat to Russians in Belarus. Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping him gain political and economic support from Moscow.

Under the 18 years of Lukashenka's rule, education and schooling in the Belarusian language had been marginalised. In 1994, 75 per cent of Belarusian children went to schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction. Today, it's less then 20 per cent. This figure is based primarily on rural schools which are gradually dying out. For comparison, only 2 per cent of pupils study in Belarusian-speaking classes and schools in Minsk, and only several children do so in the town of Mahilou with a population 360,000.

Many Belarusian parents refuse to send their children to the Belarusian-language classes simply because they do not think it would be useful for them in the future. In spite of the appeals from civil society, the authorities did not allow the establishment of even one college or university with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction.

Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests. Belarusian is almost never used in official communication and office administration. Most of the state-owned mass media broadcast in Russian. Moreover, often people are just afraid to speak Belarusian publicly. The reason is Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests.

That is why statistics demonstrate decreasing use of the Belarusian language. If in 1999 there were 36.7 per cent who claimed they spoke Belarusian every day, in 2009 it had dropped to 23.4 per cent.

Selling Russian to the Russians

Official Minsk has been trading its pro-Russian cultural policy for oil and gas loans for years. These tactics were slightly modified during the cooling down period with Russia and a thaw with Brussels in 2007-2010. In 2008, Lukashenka appointed “the first Belarusian speaking minister”. Pavel Latushka, Belarus' Minister of Culture, is the first high-ranking Lukashenka’s official who predominantly uses Belarusian even in official communication.

However, the state policy to reinforce Belarusian national identity remains poorly articulated and very inconsistent. The Belarusian media recently published a letter from Alexander Radzkou, a senior official in the presidential administration. The letter instructs regional and local authorities “to take concrete measures to prevent the policy of forced Belarusification by heads of state bodies and other organisations and the artificial limitation of the use of the Russian language in their activities."

The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it fluently. The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it fluently. Today Belarusian is the language of the intelligentsia, creative elites and young city dwellers. Many world famous brands have staged a range of successful advertising campaigns in Belarusian. It has proven that the Belarusian language has huge potential to affect people. But its prestige and wider use need to be supported.

The Belarusian Language Today

Some western policymakers elaborating strategies to democratise Belarus neglect the importance of the Belarusian language. They forget that Belarusian had been the basis for the original Belarusian national movement and statehood based on democratic ideas. It brought together people of different faiths and ethnic origins.

As David Marples noted in 1999, “For Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible”.

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cornerstone of the nation should definitely be supported alongside democratic values and human rights, as Kenneth Yalowitz, the US ambassador to Belarus, noted recently.

Kanstantsin Lashkevich

Kanstantsin is a contributing author. He is a Belarusian journalist currently doing an MA in International Politics at City University in London.

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