

Playing into Lukashenka's hands

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The Americans call it “Europe’s last dictatorship”. Skilfully playing on his country’s strategic location between resurgent Russia and a divided West, Belarus’s Alyaksandr Lukashenka is now Europe’s longest-serving political leader.

Controlling the transport corridor for Russian gas, Lukashenka will maintain a blackmailing leverage over Moscow until the Nord Stream pipeline comes on track. At the same time, to feed the consumer society he has created, which is maintained by constantly ratcheting up wages, Lukashenka needs a friendly Europe.

He seeks enough Western investment and rapprochement to make Moscow sufficiently nervous to pay Belarus’s bills, but not more than he considers healthy for his own grip on power. The point of his economic policies is to stay in office.

Although growing private investment carries the long-term risk of compromising Lukashenka’s absolute power, for the moment his survival tactic still works: make concessions to either the West or to Moscow, then rescind them as soon as the other side offers a better deal.

Political prisoners

A typical example was his promise to the West to release all political prisoners. He began to do this, then stopped. Alyaksandr Kazulin, a former presidential candidate, remains in prison, Lukashenka evidently calculating that the EU would take no steps except a protest statement. There are now two new political prisoners: Andrei Kim, a youth activist, and Syarhei Parsyukevich, an entrepreneur. They were sentenced respectively to one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half years for supposedly beating up policemen.

Recent Western measures to help have proved more effective than in the past, notably strengthening the capacity of independent media. The recent crackdown on media was the consequence of their increasing professionalism and influence. What concessions will Lukashenka demand in return for promising not to molest journalists supported by both the EU and the US? With the media under renewed attack and a resumption of the practice of taking political prisoners, the overall message is clear: the anti-democratic and deeply cynical character of the regime will not change any time soon.

US policy on human rights has been more consistent than that of the EU. It imposed sanctions on Belneftchem, the state oil exporter, rumoured to be the main source of Lukashenka's personal fortune. That could not be tolerated in Minsk. Belarus responded by effectively paralysing the US embassy, forcing it to cut its staff by up to six diplomats.

Incoherence

The West will now be represented mainly by the EU's recently-opened representation. But Brussels lacks Washington's unified approach and shows few signs of using what leverage it has. For all the European Parliament's tough statements about human rights, the Commission's priority remains rapprochement and business friendliness. It even insists that local civil society organisations receiving EU funds should be officially registered, making it close to impossible for pro-democracy NGOs to benefit. This incoherence plays perfectly into Lukashenka's hands.

The EU needs a more realistic understanding of Belarus, and policies to match. It needs to indicate that political blackmail has practical consequences. As a minimum it should show solidarity with the US by greeting the debacle over the US embassy with a week-long block on issuing visas in Minsk.

As the most influential bastion of democracy left in Minsk, the EU needs to ensure there is proper co-ordination between member states and closer co-operation with the US - which has been advocating stronger Brussels leadership for years.

Reports of plans for a national union with Russia should be ignored. There is no danger of 'losing' Belarus, and there are practical measures that the EU could take to help bring Lukashenka into

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