

Playing into Lukashenka's hands



REUTERS

The EU lacks a unified approach and shows few signs of using what leverage it has against Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship, writes Balázs Jarábik

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 increas-

ing 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 Belneftkhem, 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 line.

Balázs Jarábik is an associate fellow of the Foundation for International Relations and External Dialogue (FRIDE), based in Kiev, Ukraine.

EU's lack of transparency worsens the Arab-Israeli conflict

The EU should come clean about how public funds are spent in the Middle East, writes Daniel Fink

Israel's robust response to the so-called second Palestinian intifada, its construction of the security barrier, the second Lebanon War, the blockade of Gaza – all have reinforced an instinct for Europe to side automatically with the Palestinians.

This is not the place to debate the rights and wrongs of Israeli policy. But EU policymakers should be aware of how their support for 'human rights' organisations often in practice serves to exacerbate the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The EU allocates tens of millions of euros every year to non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) in the framework of its own programmes, including the EU's Partnership for Peace in the Middle East and the European Initiative for Human Rights and Democracy. But, as NGO Monitor studies have repeatedly demonstrated, many of these NGOs promote Palestinian rejectionism and deny Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

A case in point is the Boycotts Divestment and Sanctions campaign, which gained momentum following the 2001 Durban World Conference Against Racism. Its supporters include Christian Aid, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and the Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ): all are EU-funded NGOs.

Another NGO benefiting from EU largesse, the Israeli Campaign Against Housing Demolitions, has accused Israel of "ethnic cleansing",

"apartheid" and "colonialism".

Only three weeks ago David Miliband, the UK foreign minister, went so far as to refer to such campaigns as "madness". But, in Brussels, calling attention to such campaigns is seen as politically incorrect.

The EU does not reveal the names of individuals responsible for making such funding decisions and, in some cases, the identities of NGO grant recipients. Despite a €25 million budget for the Palestinian territories in 2006, the Commission's humanitarian aid department (ECHO) provides only a partial list of NGO recipients. Similarly, AIDCO, which manages the Partnership for Peace programme, does not require recipients to name other organisations to which they allocate a portion of their EU funds.

This is both a normative problem for the EU – which has emphasised the

importance of transparency – and a practical issue, since it impedes oversight and informed critical examination of performance.

Israelis from all sides of the political spectrum are upset by the opacity of the funding process. They understand why the European Ombudsman in early June issued a strongly worded report criticising the Commission for withholding documents from public scrutiny.

European parliamentarians, whatever their views of the Arab-Israeli conflict, have a clear obligation to demand information about how EU public funds are spent and whether or not they actually contribute to alleviating conflict or advancing EU policy.

Daniel Fink is deputy director of government affairs for NGO Monitor in Jerusalem.