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Coordinating democracy promotion: lessons from Belarus

Even if democracy promoters have had little overall impact in Belarus, they can learn from having had to coordinate to an unusual degree there.

by Nicolas Bouchet¹

On 11 October Alexander Lukashenko will secure another term as president of Belarus, a post he has held since 1994. There is no prospect of a free and fair election, or of a much stronger opposition showing than previously, despite a sharp economic deterioration. While previous presidential polls were followed by protests and crack-downs, there does not seem to be any chance of or appetite for similar demonstrations. The opposition is weak and divided, and the public wary of a Ukraine-style crisis. Over the last 20 years, the EU and US have tried somewhat, and intermittently, to promote democracy in Belarus but with little overall effect, not least because political space is mostly closed to foreign actors. Yet democracy promoters should study their engagement with Belarus, long considered a benchmark of shutting them out, as they face similarly restrictive environments in more countries. This is especially relevant with regard to Russia.

Belarus's poor record in democracy is well documented. The past two decades have been 'characterized by a systemic denial of human rights to citizens

by way of an intentional combination of restrictive laws and abusive practices.'² It scores very low in the likes of Freedom House's indices for political rights and civil liberties. Elected unexpectedly amid the greater pluralism of the early 1990s, Lukashenko has made sure no challenger could do the same with outside support, especially after

KEY POINTS

- The highly restrictive environment in Belarus has forced democracy promoters to address the challenge of coordination more than elsewhere.
- As more countries try to shut them out, how democracy promoters have tried to deal with Belarus could become more a working norm.
- EU and US actors can learn from coordination in Belarus to deal with closed or closing countries, such as Russia.
- Coordination among democracy promoters can compensate for a tougher global environment marked by stronger authoritarian powers and the 'closing space'.

seeing Colour Revolutions elsewhere. All elections in the last 20 years were marked by exclusion, intimidation and repression – and strongly criticized by the OSCE, the EU and the US. Lukashenko has created a ‘super-presidential’ system with all political institutions under his control. Independent civil society, trade unions and media have been stifled administratively, legislatively, judicially and physically.

This made Belarus the ultimate example in Europe of a repressive state with few avenues for outside support for political actors. By contrast, democracy promoters still managed to work in Russia as it became more authoritarian under President Vladimir Putin. Now there is a growing sense among them, though, that things are worse in Russia, with greater risk in supporting local partners, including exposing them to harm. Globally, the strength of authoritarian powers and the phenomenon of the ‘closing space’ for domestic and international civil society confront the EU and US democracy promoters with an increasingly restrictive environment.³ Paradoxically, though unsuccessful in spurring a political transition, their Belarus experience can inform how to work on Russia and similar countries in the coming years. The Belarusian situation effectively forced them to confront the challenge of coordination. Much more than where they faced fewer obstacles, they have had to engage in dialogue, share information, coordinate and sometimes collaborate. Learning from this can help to improve processes and policies towards countries that try to shut out external democratizing influences. For example, democracy promoters are now often forced to shift to out-of-country or on-line activities. If the insulation trend continues, the Belarus working model could become more of the norm in democracy support rather than the exception.

European and US democracy policy toward Belarus sits within a fluctuating ‘selective’ or ‘critical’ engagement of limited contacts with the regime and support for civil society and the opposition. After an initial attempt to draw it closer through economic and governmental engagement, growing abuses pushed the EU to be more critical, to try conditioning engagement on Belarus meeting certain OSCE benchmarks and to fund democracy programmes. Newer members pushed for a greater democracy dimension to EU policy, reinforced in principle by Belarus’s inclusion in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). While it is of less immediate concern to the US, attention to Belarus grew during the Bush administration, at least in public statements if not always in policy practice. The US has long funded democracy programmes

there, especially since the passage of the Belarus Democracy Act in 2004. The EU and US have generally tried to coordinate diplomatic efforts, including through the OSCE, especially over sanctions.

The US is the largest democracy donor for Belarus through USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and other bodies. EU assistance comes chiefly through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. Democracy engagement is also supposed to occur under some of the EaP’s regional actions and the European Dialogue on Modernization with Belarus’s civil society and opposition. Germany and Sweden are important democracy supporters in the country, including through development aid and political party foundations. Poland, the Netherlands, Norway and the Baltic and the Central European states are also active. Many European and national NGOs have worked on Belarus over the years, as now does the new European Endowment for Democracy. EU and US actors target a range of themes in the country: e.g. party building, civil society, freedom of information and media, democratic values, labour rights, gender issues, private-sector and market reforms, education and culture, victims of repression and vulnerable groups. Given the limitations on activities of a political nature in the country, and for some of them in getting access to it, as well as the state of its political culture, there have been moves to supporting democratization via grassroots, less obviously political civil society with a longer-term perspective.

FURTHER READING

Belarusian Yearbook 2014: A survey and analysis of developments in the Republic of Belarus in 2014

Anatoly Pankovsky / Valeria Kostyugova (eds), Lohvinaŭ, Vilnius 2015
An indispensable and very comprehensive compilation of analysis of the different domestic and international aspects of the situation in Belarus by expert nationals

Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship

Andrew Wilson, New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2011
Highly readable and well researched historical overview of the country that provides a lucid explanation of how and why the Lukashenko regime arose and endured

Outpost of tyranny? The failure of democratization in Belarus

David R. Marples, Democratization, 16:4, 2009
Gives a good overview of the development of Belarus’s undemocratic regime under Lukashenko and of how he was able to oppose successfully EU and US policies aimed at loosening his control over national politics



Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko takes part in a wreath-laying ceremony during celebrations marking Independence Day in Minsk, Belarus, July 3, 2015. *Reuters / V. Fedosenko*

Even allowing for their limited scope and funding, Western efforts have not moved Belarus toward a political transition.⁴ In part this is due to the few linkages between the two sides and the lack of EU and US leverage. These efforts also came in reaction to Lukashenko consolidating his regime rather than when they might have helped prevent it. Unlike with other countries in the region, the EU could not apply accession-related conditionality. Meanwhile Russian diplomatic and economic support bolstered Lukashenko, and democratic and opposition actors remained weak and disorganized. This is not to say that the EU and US have had no impact. Democracy assistance helped the opposition and civil society, which is heavily reliant of foreign funding,⁵ survive. Diplomacy and sanctions sometimes may have kept the persecution of regime opponents from being worse. There have also been interesting efforts to develop political society and culture as a precondition for a transition.

Western democracy funders and implementers for Belarus have an ongoing dialogue through several formats. In some donor countries, e.g. the US and Sweden, more than in others, the relevant staff from the foreign ministry, development agency and NGOs etc. meet to discuss the situation and exchange information. EU actors also convene informally in Brussels and donors present in-country have sometimes met in Minsk. The EU and US have called and sponsored international donor and implementer meetings in Brussels and elsewhere. Since 2002, a Belarus International Implementers Meeting has been held every year in interested EU countries. Alongside Political Implementers and Media Implementers Meetings, this has given actors a venue to discuss how to further their goals, and, if some desire, to coordinate their work. Broader meetings of the donor and human rights communities have also given

opportunities for those working on Belarus to convene. The level of dialogue and coordination has also been influenced by the regime's cycle of repression and relaxation, and parallel opening to the West or not, usually tracking Belarus's electoral calendar and relations with Russia.

One should not exaggerate the extent of the coordination on Belarus, however, or equate quantity with quality. While actors make an effort to come together, they do not necessarily follow the talk of coordination with actions. Some may pay only lip service to the idea. Usual funding, bureaucratic and political factors that drive organizations to guard their autonomy still apply. Some also express concern that meetings see more sharing of narrow technical information about what actors do in Belarus than fundamental reflection about their work. It also appears that, beyond the meetings,

some actors do not coordinate much to get their local partners to work better together and overcome divisions.

Absent needed research into the impact of the unusual level of interaction over Belarus, it is likely that it helped democracy promoters provide the limited but not negligible lifeline function to civil society and opposition. It improved coordination and transparency, as well as gaining information from inside Belarus and raising awareness about it. It may also have helped when US and EU actors had different programmatic approaches, or to see which one could lead on which issue. The different platforms help new staff familiarize themselves with the issues and their counterparts, and develop relations enabling them to liaise further and better. Some staff have been working on Belarus for a long time, facilitating trust when exchanging information about local partners, especially where the security need for discretion also means a risk of duplicate funding. Interaction among donors and implementers has also led to some innovative projects. Factors on the Belarus side also encourage coordination, with the regime's extreme nature easing diplomatic unanimity and the opposition divisions necessitating common messaging toward it.

Looking at the Belarus case also highlights factors making coordination more difficult or problematic. A rising number of actors – especially when a country becomes more topical, as in Ukraine – inevitably makes coordination more challenging. It also increases variety among them, which also complicates things, especially with greater discrepancy in their experience and funding weight. This needs to be managed so the process is useful to all at their respective levels and to avoid some drifting away or only engaging in a token way. In dealing with very closed and repressive countries, a delicate balance also must be struck between sharing information and transparency among do-

nors and implementers to avoid wasting resources and maintaining a level of secrecy that protects local partners. An important decision also needs to be made regarding whether and how much to include local partners in the coordination process, and whether it is more desirable to have at least one process or platform restricted to external actors only. The question of which convenor is most likely to maximize participation is also key.

To deal with countries where the working environment is turning Belarus-like, such as Russia, democracy promoters have to raise their game in terms of coordination and collaboration, perhaps even just to be able to stay in the game. Ultimately the aim and challenge of coordination is to involve as many as possible of the actors in the process and to keep them in it over time. Doing so needs those attempting to convene them also to answer some of the more fundamental questions that have arisen in the case of Belarus. These include whether to favour the use of several coordinating platforms and venues or a more centralized approach; whether the process should gradually become more institutionalized and funded accordingly; and whether it should aim for more prescriptive outputs, e.g. in terms of joint strategic plans, which risks driving some actors away, or let each choose what they want from it. In the case of Belarus, addressing these issues came after the environment had become dire for democracy promot-

ers; doing so sooner rather than later could help them build a stronger base from which to confront in many countries a much tougher environment than they have ever experienced.

SELECTED SOURCES

1. Several people have generously discussed with me the issues covered in this brief on a 'background' basis. I thank them all.
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4. See for example T. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Ashgate, 2009), J. Tolstrup, *Russia vs the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States* (Lynne Rienner, 2013) and R. Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism* (Lynne Rienner, 2012).
5. *The 2014 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (US Agency for International Development, 2014).

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