

Democracy in the Post-Soviet Space: The Cases of Russia and Belarus

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It seems to me that the central question is whether democratic change in a country like Belarus is perceived by Moscow to be a threat to Russia? This question can be divided into two parts: What is going on in Belarus? And, what is wrong with Russia?

Well, let's begin at the beginning ---- I grew up in the USSR.

I covered the whole path of a model citizen of the Soviet Union.
I was a true *Oktyabrenok*, Young Pioneer, *Komsomol member*.

I hated Andrei Sakharov and Nathan Shcharansky, although I did not know anything about them except that they were 'sworn enemies of the People.'

I used to live in a small town, in a shared flat. I did not know the history of my family or my country. The most of my relatives were declared *kulaks* and exiled to Siberia. They never came back and no knows how or where they died.

On the day when I turned 16, I told my mother: 'I don't like America and I am so happy I live in the USSR. I'll never leave this country.' My mother looked at me with amazement and did not say a word.

Everything has changed since then. We finally learned how to distinguish lies from the truth. We had to learn how to overcome fear. We were to get to know another world, the world of the truth, democracy, and freedom.

Now Nathan Shcharansky is a hero of mine. His books are a bible on democracy for activists in Belarus. I live in America most of the time and I have a great respect for that country. And I am well aware of what the regime in Belarus has done to our people and the role of Russia in supporting this dictatorship.

Today Belarus is a museum of the communist era. The repression that disfigured the lives of my generation has come back – in an absurd way - to disfigure the lives of a new generation.

Belarus has the same brutal absurdity that characterized the Soviet state:

- *One of secret services still bears the name of KGB and new monuments have been erected to its founder Dzerzhinsky.*

- *A central metro station has been renamed again as 'Lenin's Square'.*
- *Government offices have reinstated Ideological sections as well as obligatory "politinformatsia."*

Clearly, the situation in Belarus is linked to the same deterioration of values and society which is growing absurd in Putin's Russia.

*Journalists, like Anna Politkovskaya, are murdered rather than read.
Simple marches of dissidents, led by my friend Gary Kasparov, are suppressed.
Successful capitalists, like Khodorkovsky, are imprisoned.
And NGO's, the basic unit of civic society, are outlawed.*

More and more often we hear about "managed democracy" in Russia. This term is used by the Kremlin's polit-technologists who want to camouflage dictatorship with the gentle terms of democratic discourse. But it is not democracy – Russia has created the political environment which makes it acceptable for Lukashenko to be a dictator in Belarus.

Why wouldn't Russia prefer a democratic and independent Belarus as a neighbor?

Since Russia has been supporting Lukashenko for fourteen years, we can assume that there is something that is more important to President Putin than the welfare of the people of Belarus.

What cynical reasons lie behind Russia's behavior?

1. Belarus is a useful buffer between Russia and EU, Russia and NATO. If you intend to run a FSB-state, it's better to keep the international community at a distance.
2. Belarus is an important part of Russia's strategy to keep Europe dependent on Russian oil and gas.
3. There are great business possibilities. Today the majority of profit-making businesses in Belarus are state run and available for privatization.
4. Psychologically, Russia feels comfortable with having a neighbor whose image is even worse than Russia's own.

If Russia believes this, is change in Belarus still possible?

My answer would be yes, it is.

1. Today the mood of Belarusians is different. 40,000 people gathered on Kalinovsky square on 19 March of last year, which shows that people have begun to overcome their fear. A thousand people were arrested but it didn't stop the protest.

2. The regime, foreseeing its imminent decline, becomes more and more perverse, and the president more and more deranged. Political activists get arrested for anything: for acting on behalf of a non-registered organization, as Zmiter Dashkevich, for insulting the president and authorities, as Andrey Klimov, for distributing newspapers, for graffiti, stickers and pins. Today Lukashenka does not trust anybody; he even appointed his own son as his national security advisor. Today the Belarusian dictator has only three friends – Cuba, Iran and Venezuela.
3. The European Union and the International Community are beginning to pay attention to Belarus.

- *The EU has proclaimed a Neighborhood policy with 12 conditions for Belarus.*
- *The US president has signed the Belarus Democracy Act (BDRA).*
- *The EU and the US have broadened visa sanctions against the Belarusian officials who have violated human rights.*
- *The special UN rapporteur has submitted a hard-hitting report on Belarus.*

The traditional question is what has to be done to ensure the return of Belarus to the democratic family of Europe?

1. *First and foremost – both sides of the Atlantic have got to call things by their true names. A country, where people disappear and killed, where peaceful protests are attacked by riot police, it is a **dictatorship**.*
2. *Both Europe and the US must maintain firm positions not only as to the illegitimacy of the Lukashenka Presidency but also as to the illegitimacy of the Parliament, and of any referendum about a union with Russia.*
3. *The International Community must continue to demand that both Russia and Belarus free of all political prisoners (such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexander Kozulin), conduct an investigation into the disappearances and murders of political activists and journalists, hold free and fair elections, and permit open access to the media..*
4. *We all must insist that the international organizations implement their own decisions concerning HR violations (UN resolutions on Belarus, decisions of the Belarus Democracy Act, adherence to the entry visa denial list, etc.)*
5. *And Europe and the US need to begin to impose economic sanctions on Belarus. Although some express concern about the effect of economic sanctions on average citizens, the fact is the increase in trade between the EU and Belarus is delaying the fall of the regime. Fully 50% of Belarus trade is with the major European countries to the delight of Lukashenka..*

Thanks to the work of Vaclav Havel, Natan Scharansky and many of the men and women in this room -- the good news is that my generation has been liberated from the

Soviet ideology – at least mentally. This generation in Belarus is fully capable of telling truth from falsehood and in governing ourselves and our nation

The bad news is that we are still physically trapped in an absurd dictatorship from the past which lives on – like an aging vampire – thanks to the cynical support of Russia. If we could vote, we could free ourselves. If we could have elections, we could win them. If we could even publish our ideas in our own country, we could have freedom in an afternoon.

What is certain is that when democratic forces come to power in Belarus, our country will “return” to Europe where she has belonged historically, culturally and politically for hundreds of years.

Thank you.