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COMMENT

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Soft power works better > Sanctions unlikely to bring down Lukashenko

In response to a crackdown on political opposition, the EU has imposed sanctions against 157 Belarusian officials. Tough measures are unlikely to bring the country closer to democratic reforms, however. The EU needs to maximize its soft power in order to erode the regime and counteract fear and indifference among the population.

The presidential elections held in Belarus on 19 December ended the period of cautious engagement between the EU and Belarus that has prevailed during the past couple of years. The brutal repression of political opposition was followed by loud calls from Belarusian activists as well as many Western commentators for a tough response from the EU. The policy of engagement was quickly declared a failure and an embarrassment for the Union. Many critics have also accused the EU of having entered into a geopolitical game at the expense of defending European values in its immediate neighbourhood.

Yet over the past decade, the EU has been tougher on Belarus than on any other neighbouring country. It consistently tightened its policy of sanctions throughout the years up to 2008, as the authoritarian leadership grew more repressive. There were virtually no official contacts between Minsk and Brussels, and very limited contact when it came to citizens and businesses.

At the same time, the EU nurtured cooperation with other authoritarian regimes in the east and the south. While several former (semi-) authoritarian partners of the EU have lost power through popular protests (as in Ukraine in 2004, Moldova in

2009, and most recently in Tunisia), Lukashenko remains in power and is tightening his grip.

This can hardly be blamed on the EU's policy of engagement launched in 2008, when the release of political prisoners by Minsk allowed the suspension of sanctions, the establishment of high-level official contacts and the inclusion of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership. Geopolitical considerations did play a part in the EU's change of course, but at the same time the engagement was a fresh attempt to encourage democratic reforms after years of isolating and punishing Belarus—to no avail. Although the positive changes in Belarus ahead of the December elections were minor, the new approach culminated in the promise of EUR 4 billion in aid from the EU in return for domestic reforms.

The new wave of repression does not allow the EU to continue engagement with the top leadership of Belarus, who are responsible for large-scale arrests and harassment of the opposition. However, the EU should make an effort to keep open as many channels of communication and cooperation as possible. In this way, it can exploit the existing divisions within the Belarusian elite and erode the system from the inside. Cooperation and openness are also

essential in order to reach out to the Belarusian citizens, whose understandings of the EU are often limited or flawed.

It is welcome that the EU now emphasizes stepping up support for civil society and the population at large, and wishes to move forward in order to start negotiations on a visa facilitation agreement. Belarus also continues to participate in the Eastern Partnership, although the level of its participation is not clear. The EU should also use the so-called Joint Interim Plan on EU-Belarus cooperation, prepared last year, as a basis for further engagement, and involve civil society in the process.

There is a danger that the Belarusian leadership will block closer contacts with the EU out of (justifiable) fear that this will threaten its control over society and even groups within the elite, or possibly because of an offer from Moscow that is conditional upon limiting cooperation with the West. However, Lukashenko has little choice but to try to continue balancing between East and West, and therefore probably wants to avoid alienating the EU.

In the end, it is the will and courage of the Belarusian people that will prove indispensable for democratizing their country. Sanctions are, by and large, not an effective

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instrument for promoting democracy. The EU still has soft power in the neighbourhood, which enables it to encourage sometimes unexpected change through the attractiveness of its values and system of governance. A recent example is Moldova, where a strongly pro-European government came to power in 2009, pursued extensive reforms with the EU's assistance, and renewed its power through elections held in November 2010. Openness, dialogue and multiple contacts can maximize the EU's power of attraction, whereas isolation and coercion will work against it.

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