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**An Isolated State
How and Why Has Belarusian Foreign Policy Been
Constrained in The Years 1991-2009?**

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Contents

Introduction	3
Why Does Belarus Matter? Literature Review	
1. Belarus: The Inside Story	8
The Rise of Authoritarianism and The Command Economy Impact on Foreign Policy Choices A Weak Opposition A Natural Consequence? Concluding Remarks	
2. The Failure of the West	16
Western Policy and Its Failures A Pretext for Isolation Belarusian Obstacles Concluding Remarks	
3. Russian-Belarusian Relations	23
Interests Why A Narrow Foreign Policy? How Has Integration Achieved This? Concluding Remarks	
4. Change for Belarus?	35
Deterioration in Russian-Belarusian Relations Internal Changes New Western Policy Problems for Lukashenka Concluding Remarks	
Conclusion	46
Where Now for Belarus?	
Bibliography	48

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has remained an isolated state with limited foreign policy options. Shunned by the West and known as Europe's 'last dictatorship', Belarus has been almost entirely reliant on Russia for its beyond-borders relationships. This unbalanced foreign policy is at odds with the official Belarusian line. According to the government, Belarusian foreign policy has always included ties with both Russia and the West.¹

However, evidence speaks otherwise. On 8 December 1991 at a Belarusian hunting lodge, *Belovezhskaia Pushcha*, the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian leaderships signed an agreement dissolving the USSR on 31 December 1991.² A promising independent state emerged, but almost two decades later, Belarus – despite having helped to destroy it – bears the most resemblance to the Soviet Union of all the successor states. Relations with the West completely dissolved when Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka established his 'one-man rule' by amending the Belarusian constitution with a referendum in 1996.³ Integration with Russia became fierce, culminating with the signature of the Russia Belarus Union Treaty in 1997. Since then Belarus has been cut off from the West as Lukashenka has focused exclusively on a 'Russian vector' of foreign policy.⁴

Many have attributed Belarus' isolation almost entirely to Lukashenka and his autocratic regime. According to such an argument, Lukashenka has pursued a policy

¹ Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United Kingdom, 'Foreign Policy of Belarus: Tradition of a Pragmatic Neighbourhood'; 'Key Priorities of Foreign Policy'; 'Essential Principles and Goals of Foreign Policy', www.uk.belembassy.org/eng

² N Petro and A Rubinstein, *Russian Foreign Policy: From Empire to Nation-State*, (New York: Longman, 1997), p. 99

³ A Gricius, 'The Belarus Factor: The Impact on Lithuania's Foreign Policy and on Stability in the Baltic Region' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 59-80, p. 67

⁴ J Löwenhardt et al., 'A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau', *International Affairs* (Vol. 77, No. 3, 2001), pp. 605-20, p. 609

of self-isolation as a means to hold onto power. Furthermore, his abuse of human rights and a backwards, centralised economy have left the West with no other choice but to isolate it in the hope that pressure will encourage democratic reform.

The West's reaction to Belarus has formed another possible constraint on Belarusian foreign policy. The West has pursued what are effectively counterproductive policies towards Belarus. Their desire to instil democracy through a policy of isolation has served no other purpose than to deepen Lukashenka's grip on power and cause Belarus to retreat further away.

If a combination of Lukashenka's self-isolation and inadequate Western policy has limited Belarusian foreign policy, then Belarus has had no other choice than to turn to Russia. However, it becomes clear that this exclusive relationship has been an enormous constraint on Belarus' foreign relations. Some would go so far as to argue that a controlling and paranoid Kremlin, determined to keep its grip on the former Soviet sphere, has forced Belarus' isolation.

These three ideas will be analysed in detail, with an explanation of how and why each factor has limited Belarus' foreign policy options from the collapse of Communism to the present day. It will also be important to examine the change in Belarusian foreign policy that has occurred over the years 2007-2009, which at the time of writing are still in a process of evolution. This change – a slight movement away from Russia towards the West – and its cause will help to shed light on exactly why Belarus has remained so isolated since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Why Does Belarus Matter?

It is worth considering what the stakes in Belarus are and why a constrained foreign policy is undesirable. Many argue that Belarus' geostrategic significance⁵ means that the country is too important to be left in isolation.⁶ Belarus now borders both the EU and NATO, making the country an important factor in Eastern and Central European stability.⁷ Following their expansion, these organisations must take responsibility for their new neighbours. What goes on in Belarus matters in 2009. An isolated, autocratic regime on the fringes of these organisations is in no one's interest.

In addition to being a factor in regional stability, Belarus is an important transit country for Russian energy.⁸ As the EU's dependence on Russian oil and gas heightens,⁹ Western politicians need to take Belarus seriously and not just dismiss it as 'Europe's last dictatorship'.

Finally, languishing in isolation is troubling for Belarus' 10 million citizens. Although it is often argued that Belarusians do not care much for democracy and foreign affairs, and that they are satisfied provided they are able to put food on their table, the situation is changing. Democratic youth movements and growing support of the opposition are evidence of this. The benefits to be reaped from opening up to the rest of the world would allow the people of Belarus – who were once considered to be the most educated and advanced of all the Soviet states – to realise their full potential.

By identifying how and why Belarus has been left in isolation for the best part of twenty years, it should be possible for policy makers – from the West, Belarus and

⁵ See, for example, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), p. 6

⁶ Gricius, p. 59

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 60

⁸ G Dura, 'The EU's Limited Response to Belarus' Pseudo "New Foreign Policy"', *Centre for European Policy Studies: CEPS Policy Brief*, (No. 151, February 2008), p. 6

⁹ *Ibid.*

Russia – to tackle the problem with greater effectiveness and help improve the lot of a country that deserves to have its voice heard within the international community.

Literature Review

Traditionally, literature on Belarus has focused on the failures of the Russia Belarus Union State. There is a general consensus that the project has failed to achieve the aims of integration that were originally laid out upon its conception, yet both Russia and Belarus continue to pursue what is largely viewed as a lost cause (Lo, Balmaceda 1999, Deyermond, Godin, Markus). The argument will have its use here, but there is little more to say on the matter from this angle alone. Alex Danilovich's *Russian-Belarusian Integration* draws on the debate in a more useful way by proposing exactly why the union has been doomed to failure. He argues that the project was an electoral platform for Russia and little more. His ideas will be touched upon but will also be applied to the case of Belarus, which Danilovich is reluctant to do.

Works that chart the evolution of Belarusian domestic politics and foreign policy will be central to this study (Garnett and Legvold, Lynch 2005, Marples 2007). They have identified trends over the last twenty years that will be central to forming conclusions about the impact of domestic politics and Western response on Belarusian foreign policy.

The arrival of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin's top seat naturally provoked a new wave of literature concerning Belarus. Works that examine Putin's attempts to rebuild Russia's power and reassert hegemony in the post-Soviet sphere using energy resources have injected new life into the arguments surrounding integration

(Baev, Bruce, Martinsen, Nygren 2008, Perovic et al.). This theory will have significant use in analysing Russian behaviour towards Belarus.

The works that have influenced this study the most are Thomas Ambrosio's. His 2009 book, *Authoritarian Backlash*, argues that Russia has actively sought to keep an authoritarian leader in Belarus since this serves its own interests. This argument is absolutely central to Chapter 4, but slightly different conclusions shall be derived.

Events of the years 2008-9 are now calling for more research to be undertaken. This paper has attempted to touch on recent changes using mostly news articles and immediate analytical publications, whilst bearing in mind past trends. An opening for new literature has thus emerged; clearly there is much more to be said on the matter as the Belarus story shows no sign of reaching an obvious conclusion.

1. Belarus: The Inside Story

Lukashenka's authoritarian regime and command economy have been a stumbling block to forging ties with other countries.¹⁰ This chapter will examine the evolution of domestic politics and its subsequent impact on Belarusian foreign policy options, showing that when the regime was more democratic, the country was more open. However, when autocracy was consolidated and human rights abuses were at their worst, Belarus has been cut off from the rest of the world.

In addition to showing how autocracy and a state controlled economy have led to international isolation, it will be necessary to explain exactly *why* Belarus has taken this path. It will become evident that there are other contributory factors alongside Lukashenka's active pursuit of this regime and a self-isolationist policy.

The Rise of Authoritarianism and The Command Economy

After the fall of communism, the Belarusian government established itself as a nuclear-free neutral state. The country showed the possibility of moving towards the West as it experimented with reform and started negotiating its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU.¹¹ The period could be described as one of 'political freedom and relative democracy'.¹² However, this period survived only briefly under the leadership of Stanislav Shushkevich and then Vyacheslav Kebich prior to Lukashenka's 1994 election.

¹⁰ A Sannikov, 'Russia's Varied Roles in Belarus' in *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, M Balmaceda, J Clem and L Tarlow (eds.), (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 222-31, p. 222

¹¹ S White and I McAllister, 'Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?', *Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Aberdeen* (Studies in Public Policy Number 437, 2008), p.5

¹² V Stilitski, 'Internal Developments in Belarus' in 'Changing Belarus', D Lynch (ed.), *Institute for Security Studies* (Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), pp. 25-45, p. 25

Even before this election the small efforts at reform were fading as the political will did not exist to carry them through¹³ and there was a lack of support for change. It all seemed too difficult; Belarus was facing severe economic decline and regressing back into the Soviet system was the easiest way of counteracting this. Support for alignment to Russia was growing amongst traditional communist groups and those favouring an eastern outlook. This support began to indicate a movement away from liberalism and democracy.¹⁴

Lukashenka won the 1994 presidential elections on an unexpected wave of support based on his anti-corruption line and the promise of reintegration with Russia.¹⁵ Following his victory, Belarus began to retreat into a shell of autocracy as Lukashenka consolidated his power over the ensuing years by amending the constitution with a series of internationally unrecognised referendums.¹⁶ He has won every presidential election since, the results of which have more than likely been falsified.¹⁷ His political opponents have been suppressed and denied registration on absurd grounds.¹⁸ Some have disappeared, presumed murdered on Lukashenka's orders.¹⁹

In addition to removing any hope of establishing democracy in Belarus, Lukashenka also put an end to any economic reform. Following his election, Lukashenka used the examples of other ex-Soviet states and their bad experiences to

¹³ A Kaminski, 'Belarus as an Object of Polish Security Concerns' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 37-58, p. 48

¹⁴ R Legvold, 'Belarus in U.S. Foreign Policy' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 131-172, p. 134

¹⁵ This was in fact his opponent Kebich's platform, which Lukashenka adopted over the course of his campaign when he realised that it was a sound vote-winner.

¹⁶ D Marples, 'The Lukashenka Phenomenon: Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus', *Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies* (No. 21, August 2007)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 36-8

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 8

justify the reintroduction of a command economy.²⁰ With the advent of this young, inexperienced former collective farm manager, came a regression back into the Soviet days.

Impact on Foreign Policy Choices

Lukashenka's autocracy and command economy have had a twofold impact on Belarus' foreign policy options. Firstly, as an 'autocrat', the Belarusian president has sought to hold on to power through a policy of self-isolation. Secondly, the nature of domestic politics has led to the international community alienating Belarus.

Lukashenka's Autocratic Intent

By cutting off ties with the outside world, Lukashenka has consolidated power in two ways. Firstly, it is far more difficult for the international community to bolster the opposition and support democratic reformists in an isolated state. Secondly, by isolating his country, Lukashenka has created the myth of an external enemy and a persecuted portrait of Belarus.²¹ This has allowed Lukashenka to legitimise his harsh rule and portray himself as the protector of Belarus in the face of a hostile West.

With regards to the economy, Lukashenka has had a strong interest in keeping the country closed. Opening up to other countries would be equivalent to opening the door to a strong entrepreneurial class, who would be in a position to influence the political system.²² Furthermore, if he were to allow the outside world to privatise his

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 25

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 59

²² C Rontoyanni, 'Belarusian Foreign Policy' in 'Changing Belarus', D Lynch (ed.), *Institute for Security Studies* (Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), pp. 47-66, p. 62

economy, he would quickly lose control²³ since the command economy allows him to keep unemployment low and wages at a decent level, securing his popularity.

The West's Refusal

The lack of democracy and free markets in Belarus has meant that the outside world is also *unwilling* to deal with Belarus. The West refuses to establish a working relationship with the elite of a country that abuses human rights – key events of consolidating autocracy in Belarus have provoked the West to shun Lukashenka's regime.

The 1996 referendum that amended the Belarusian constitution was the first event that caused the international community to turn its back on Belarus. In March 1995, Belarus and the EU had signed its PCA. However, this agreement was never concluded because of the referendum, which the EU refused to recognise.²⁴ Other examples include the 2004 referendum (which again amended the constitution and allowed Lukashenka to run for yet another term) and parliamentary elections. These irked the US, provoking the Bush Administration to produce a law entitled the 'Belarus Democracy Act'.²⁵ This criticised Lukashenka's regime and listed a series of sanctions to be implemented until democratic reform took place and full investigations into missing political opponents were carried out. This was effectively a means of isolating Belarus; the US refused to deal with it because of the unpleasant internal situation.

Looking through a more pragmatic (as opposed to ideological) prism, the West has been forced to isolate Belarus because of its command economy, which is

²³ D Trenin, 'Moscow's Relations with Belarus: An Awkward Ally' in 'Changing Belarus', D Lynch (ed.), *Institute for Security Studies* (Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), pp. 67-78, p. 73

²⁴ J Löwenhardt, et al., p. 607

²⁵ Belarus Democracy Act, US Public Law 108-347, 20 October 2004

not compatible with that of liberalised markets.²⁶ Belarus is severely limited in its ability to export to the West, mainly due to the lack of competitiveness of its output.²⁷

Those reformists in Belarus who want to move closer to Europe know that economic reform is essential.

Thus the impact of the regime on foreign policy is enhanced. As an autocrat, Lukashenka isolates his country in order to hold onto power and legitimise his rule, and then the West refuses to deal with the country because of his authoritarian rule and the command economy. Here we have a regime that wants to be isolated, and an outside world that refuses to deal with it. The result of being shunned by the EU and the US is actually in the Belarusian president's favour.

A Weak Opposition

The weakness of the Belarusian opposition has allowed Lukashenka to survive for fifteen years without a serious threat to his presidency. It does exist and support is growing, but it remains largely splintered;²⁸ suffers from harassment from the Lukashenka regime; is 'demeaned and lampooned in the official media';²⁹ and is not particularly popular.³⁰ There is a distinct anti-Russianness to the opposition's rhetoric, which has denied them support³¹ since anti-Russian sentiment is not very strong in Belarus. Although close relations with Russia are no longer as popular as they were in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the idea that Belarus still needs Russia is prevalent amongst Belarusians. So as a serious, popular challenger to the

²⁶ This is not to say that there is no trade between Belarus and countries other than Russia, but they are severely limited.

²⁷ T Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), p. 117

²⁸ Marples 2007, p. 57

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 90

³⁰ K Martinsen, 'The Russian-Belarusian Union and the Near Abroad', *Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies*, June 2002, p. 37

³¹ A Rozanov, 'Belarus: Foreign Policy Options' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 19-35, p. 32

regime has yet to emerge,³² Lukashenka is free to pursue whatever whimsical policy he chooses, including that of isolation.

A Natural Consequence?

Alongside the path chosen by the elite, there are two characteristics of Belarusian society that appear to have guided Belarus towards autocracy and isolation. First, Belarus' Soviet legacy has been more pronounced than that of other ex-Soviet republics. The country has been more inclined to hang on to old communist traditions, including hostility to the West. Second, Belarusian society has displayed evidence of passivity over the course of its independence. This has led to the acceptance of autocracy and the country's role in the international community.

The Soviet Legacy

Belarus was one of the countries that suffered the most devastation during the Second World War, in which a quarter of all Belarusians are said to have died. The country was rebuilt on a Soviet basis following the devastation and received a huge amount of help to do so from Moscow.³³ As a result, Belarus became a Soviet superstar. The success story 'instilled a high level of pride in Soviet achievements and further reinforced the connection between Soviet and Belarusian identity.'³⁴ Lukashenka was able to alienate Belarus from the West by capitalising on nostalgia for the glory days and drawing a clear divide between East and West.³⁵

³² A Moshes, 'Is Russia's New Belarus Policy Emerging?', *Finnish Institute for International Affairs*, (Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, Policy Memo 355, November 2004)

³³ Gricius, p. 61. The full extent of this help and the resulting dependency on Russia will be fully analysed in Chapter 4.

³⁴ Ambrosio 2009, p. 122

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 122-3

In addition to identifying itself culturally with its successful Soviet past and aligning its foreign policy respectively, it seemed to most Belarusians that embarking on painful reform made little sense when the old model had served them so well. At the start of the economic downturn following the collapse of the USSR, accusing fingers pointed towards democracy and market liberalism.³⁶

Social Passivity

Since the Belarusian state looks after its citizens so much, provides artificial wage hikes and employs a large number of people, the majority of the Belarusian population fears political change.³⁷ Other than simply fearing the problems that democracy would bring, Lukashenka has proven to be a popular alternative because he managed to turn around the country's economic crisis.³⁸ Although this has been achieved with the aforementioned wage hikes and using unsustainable methods, there is some truth in it.³⁹ Lukashenka's regime is thus allowed to perpetuate due to a lack of support for democratic change and because of his relative popularity. To many Belarusians, economic stability provided by a dictator is a far better option than democratic financial misery.

Concluding Remarks

By accepting the ascent of such a personality and the continual abuse of power, Belarusians have accepted their lot as citizens of an undemocratic country. Such acceptance alongside a weak opposition has left Lukashenka unchallenged to isolate his country from the international community in order to consolidate his power

³⁶ T Beichelt, 'Autocracy and Democracy in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine', *Democratization* (Vol. 11, No. 5, December 2004), pp. 113-132, p. 129

³⁷ Stilitiski, p. 39

³⁸ Marples 2007, p. 13

³⁹ *Ibid.*

and image as Belarus' protector in the face of a hostile West. In turn, the West has rejected Belarus as human rights abuses have mounted and the Belarusian economy has become impossible to work with.

2. The Failure of the West

Western policy towards Belarus has at times been ineffective and exacerbated the problem of isolation. Of course dealing with an authoritarian state determined to retain its Soviet past is not easy, but there is evidence that Western policies have largely failed to coax Belarus out of its shell. In some cases, they have caused it to move further away and have given Lukashenka the legitimacy to clamp down on his people's freedom further. However, one could also argue that Western policy has always been doomed to failure due to the obstacles of Belarusian bureaucracy and Lukashenka's attitude to isolation.

Western Policy and Its Failures

A Western policy of isolation and exclusion has never yielded good results. This section will analyse its failings, explaining how a lack of funding and poor coordination in the past has failed to produce democratic reform inside Belarus. It is then important to consider the reason for this failure. Here it will be argued that there has been a distinct lack of political will; the regime is simply too hard to handle and the West does not care enough.

US Isolation and Sanctions

The US has generally pursued a policy of isolation, excluding Belarus from Western community and its institutions.⁴⁰ An example of such a policy was the US 2004 Belarus Democracy Act, which imposed sanctions in the hope of forcing a regime change. This tactic proved fruitless. Isolation removes any levers of influence

⁴⁰ Ambrosio 2009, p. 109

that the West could potentially have within the country.⁴¹ How can the West possibly expect to influence the regime that it has cut ties with? Only through dialogue and engagement can co-operation be achieved. However, this is not to say that the dialogue should be pandering or concern for human rights should be compromised.

As well as removing levers of influence, it is worth noting that sanctions and isolation techniques are simply policy *tools*, which the West has tried to palm off as actual *policy*. Robert Legvold makes a similar point when he states that other than the US's focus on democracy, 'Washington had few, if any, other specific objectives in Belarus.'⁴² Vague objectives will not achieve concrete results.

EU Exclusion

The EU has been more open to engaging with Belarus.⁴³ However, just like the US, the EU has failed to encourage democratic reform.⁴⁴ Brussels has often put forward plans for co-operation, but these have not always been followed through because of the nature of Lukashenka's regime. For example, Belarus was the only country in Europe excluded from the PCA.⁴⁵ Belarus was also omitted from the EU's 2004 Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP was a structure established to face the new challenges of an enlarged union and co-operate with non-member states.⁴⁶

Belarus was excluded because of the flawed 2004 referendum.⁴⁷ The ENP Strategy Paper stated that it would extend its benefits towards Belarus if a democratic

⁴¹ Legvold, p. 164

⁴² *Ibid.* p.145

⁴³ Ambrosio 2009, p. 110

⁴⁴ 'Introduction', D Lynch (ed.), 'Changing Belarus', *Institute for Security Studies* (Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), p. 9

⁴⁵ Ambrosio 2009, p. 110

⁴⁶ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 'Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours', Brussels, 11 March 2003; Communication from the Commission, 'European Neighbourhood Policy: Strategy Paper', Brussels, 12 May 2004

⁴⁷ Dura, p. 2

government were established. Even if one evaluates Europe as having been more co-operative than the US in the past for initially proposing projects, such exclusion leaves the EU without a clear framework for dealing with Belarus.⁴⁸ It also has exactly the same effect as the US ‘policy’ of isolation; levers are removed.

Not Enough Cash

The West has always defended itself by stating that it has provided financial support to humanitarian and democratic projects. The EU supported such projects through the ENP.⁴⁹ However, the figures are quite plainly shocking. For example, in 2005, the US funded civil society groups in Belarus with \$11.8 million⁵⁰ and in the same year, the EU’s aid spending in Belarus was €10 million.⁵¹ Although one might say that every little helps, this is clear evidence of a lack of commitment to the cause. The money seems more like a token effort.

With regards to US aid programmes allocated to the former Soviet Union, Robert Legvold points out that ‘Belarus usually ranked last among all twelve recipients, whatever the program.’⁵² The money was simply was not enough to achieve any leverage in Belarus.⁵³ Furthermore, if Belarus had received the same care and attention as other states, then perhaps a populist leader such as Lukashenka would not have had a fertile base, disillusioned with the benefits of democracy to capitalise on.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Communication from the Commission, ‘European Neighbourhood Policy: Strategy Paper’, Brussels, 12 May 2004

⁵⁰ Ambrosio 2009, p. 113

⁵¹ D Lynch, ‘Catalysing Change’ in ‘Changing Belarus’, D Lynch (ed.), *Institute for Security Studies* (Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), pp. 97-124, p. 110

⁵² Legvold, p. 150

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Finally, this amount of money is not enough to compete with Russian aid and subsidies. Belarus is not going to embark on the path of democracy and integrate itself into the global community for a few dollars when Russia is offering so much more and not requesting reform. The full impact of Russian financial support will be analysed in the next chapter.

Poor Co-ordination

The EU has lacked co-ordination with regards to Belarus, especially following the 2004 expansion when Belarus' neighbours joined the union.⁵⁴ There are now widely differing stakes in Belarus. For example, why would Paris care as much about Belarus as a neighbour such as Vilnius does? It is also worth questioning whether the EU and the US should have been more co-ordinated in their approaches. At both levels – either within the EU or between Western organisations – a properly conceived and thoroughly co-ordinated policy towards Belarus would have been more likely to reap rewards.

Who Cares About Belarus Anyway?

Belarus is often described as a 'forgotten' country.⁵⁵ It has been overlooked⁵⁶ and denied a broader range of foreign policy options simply because it is not considered important enough. John Löwenhardt et al. point out that 'the European council has not considered [Belarus and Moldova] sufficiently important to warrant a Common Strategy.'⁵⁷ However, post expansion, the EU really should accept some

⁵⁴ Dura, p. 8

⁵⁵ Löwenhardt et al., p. 605

⁵⁶ Martinsen, p. 30

⁵⁷ Löwenhardt et al., p. 607

responsibility for these countries as they both border the union, making their stability and domestic politics of direct interest to Brussels.

Löwenhardt speaks extensively of those in Belarus who he labels as ‘disillusioned centrists’. These are people who believe that they have been ‘profoundly betrayed by what they perceive as inadequate Western assistance’.⁵⁸ They believe that the West missed the window of opportunity in the years 1991-4, when Belarus was at its most open and democratic.⁵⁹ Apparently ‘by marginalizing Belarus prior to Lukashenka’s election in 1994, “the Western countries gave Belarus away to Russia”’.⁶⁰ If Belarus had received more international attention following the fall of Communism, would the country be living in isolation under a repressive regime today?

A Pretext for Isolation

The West’s policy of isolation, exclusion and sanctions has given Lukashenka a vital prop in order to legitimise his rule and the isolation of his country.⁶¹ The West’s hostility has simply provided more ground for the government to capitalise on, portraying Belarus as a persecuted victim.

Lukashenka’s response to the US Belarus Democracy Act demonstrates this problem. He stated on 6 October 2004, two days after the act was passed: ‘If you scold me for seeking internal and external enemies, why are you giving me a pretext for finding such an enemy outside the country?’⁶² The act gave Lukashenka the perfect platform to rally his people; Belarus needs him to protect it against this foe.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 608

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 609

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.612

⁶¹ Lynch 2005, p. 9

⁶² J Maksymiuk, ‘Analysis: Belarusian President Slams U.S. Belarus Democracy Act’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 October 2004

The idea of an external enemy has been used to win advantage in the last two presidential elections and the 2004 referendum⁶³ by creating solidarity through anti-Western sentiment.⁶⁴ Although the act supports the development of democracy, it does not do so in the most effective way possible. The external pressure simply results in more suppression inside the country.⁶⁵

In this way, the West's policy has been entirely counterproductive. Dov Lynch goes so far as to say that EU policy has formed the *foundations* of the Lukashenka regime by giving him a reason to isolate his country and legitimise his harsh rule.⁶⁶ A hostile policy towards Belarus has served to isolate the country even more than Lukashenka could ever have managed by himself.

Belarusian Obstacles

The West is not entirely to blame for its failures since those providing assistance frequently encounter obstacles set up by the Belarusian government.⁶⁷ NGOs find it incredibly difficult to get registered, and even if they do manage, they are likely to be closed down at a later date. This makes life very difficult for international actors attempting to provide assistance to democratic forces⁶⁸ and could help explain why there has been a reluctance to direct more funding toward Belarus.

In addition, Lukashenka's indifference to the West has meant that any attempt at engagement has been likely to fail. Europe has traditionally been given very little

⁶³ Marples, 2007, p. 60

⁶⁴ Rontoyanni, p. 53

⁶⁵ Lynch 2005, p. 100

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106

⁶⁷ P Zurawski vel Grajewski, 'Belarus: The Unrecognized Challenge' in 'Changing Belarus', D Lynch (ed.), *Institute for Security Studies* (Chailot Paper, No. 85, November 2005), pp. 79-95, p. 91

⁶⁸ Dura, p. 7

priority on Belarus' foreign policy agenda⁶⁹ and the Belarusian government has not set itself the task of becoming an EU member unlike other former Soviet states.⁷⁰

Even if the West were to rethink its policy, it is likely that Lukashenka would turn his nose up at it anyway. This is because Belarus has Russia to fall back on, rendering Western carrots and sticks completely ineffective.

Concluding Remarks

With its lack of co-ordination, funds and concern, the West's 'policy' of isolation and exclusion has had little or no impact on the Lukashenka administration. Isolation removes any sort of lever, meaning that the West has deprived itself of any potential influence. In addition, isolation has handed Lukashenka the perfect excuse to strengthen his already harsh rule and move further away from the international community.

This criticism is not to expect the West to bow down to Lukashenka's demands, but to demonstrate that isolation is not effective. However, engaging with the regime prior to reform would risk the West appearing to have sold out by compromising its values of freedom and democracy.⁷¹ Here one must decide whether the end (the achievement of democratic values in Belarus and the end of its isolation) justifies the means (the compromise of such very values).⁷² Even if one could overcome this dilemma, the West would still come up against the obstacles of the Lukashenka regime.

⁶⁹ V Nikonov, 'The Place of Belarus on Russia's Foreign Policy Agenda' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 105-129, p. 114

⁷⁰ Dura, p. 9

⁷¹ Lynch 2005, p. 119

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 105

3. Russian-Belarusian Relations

Belarus' relationship with Russia has proven to be another constraint on Belarusian foreign policy. One could argue that the combination of an authoritarian regime and an inadequate response from the West has left Belarus with little choice other than to turn to Russia. This 'last option idea' is essentially true, but it is clear that there are other reasons why Belarus has pursued its relations with Russia.

In order to show how and why Belarusian foreign policy has been constrained by the relationship, this chapter will first examine the impetus behind Russian-Belarusian integration from both countries' point of view. It will then explain exactly why Russia has had an interest in pursuing an exclusive relationship with Belarus and how it has achieved this with the process of integration.

Interests

Despite the more Western-looking foreign policy of the years 1991-3, co-operation with Russia swiftly began as a pro-Russian sentiment took hold. The Kremlin strongly encouraged this eastward shift in Belarusian foreign policy,⁷³ which culminated in April 1997 when Belarus and Russia signed the Russia Belarus Union Treaty. The aim of the Union State was to integrate the two countries by establishing deep political and economic ties with a supranational structure.⁷⁴ The impetus behind the union varied between the two countries, although there were some distinct points of overlap.

⁷³ Gricius, p. 68

⁷⁴ B Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 67

An All-Round Vote Winner

For both Russian and Belarusian politicians the prospect of integration was a means of securing electoral support. Alex Danilovich describes in great detail about how electoral needs coincided with mounted rhetoric concerning integration, which was popular amongst the Russian population at the start of the 1990s. He uses the theory that foreign policy in Russia during this decade was directly related to domestic political struggles due to the lack of external enemies facing Russia and the renewed concern with domestic welfare.⁷⁵ He states that this theory does not really apply to Belarus since there have been no domestic struggles – Lukashenka is an autocrat.⁷⁶

However, an autocrat still has political challenges to face and needs to keep control. Lukashenka has used the integration card too in order to win domestic support. The Belarusian president first used integration as a vote-winner in his electoral campaign in 1994. The platform proved successful due to nostalgia for the glory days of the Soviet years⁷⁷ and the popularity of the concept of ‘Slavic brotherhood’.

Boris El'tsin, Russian president 1991-9, also used the policy of integration as a crowd-pleaser. The union has often been described as a ‘PR project’⁷⁸ since the idea of reintegration with a former Soviet state was used to appease those who blamed El'tsin for the destruction of the USSR.⁷⁹ Vladimir Putin, Russian president 2000-8, put less emphasis on reintegration. If one follows the argument that the union was

⁷⁵ A Danilovich, *Russian-Belarusian Integration: Playing Games Behind the Kremlin Walls*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 4

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 6-8

⁷⁷ Gricius, p. 68

⁷⁸ Interview with Stanislav Belkovskii, *Ekho Moskvy Radio*, 29 May 2009

⁷⁹ Danilovich, p. 2

used as a vote-winner, this is because he was more secure in his presidency.⁸⁰ In addition, nostalgia for the USSR was weaker and the symbolic value that the union had under El'tsin no longer existed.⁸¹ Putin adopted a much more pragmatic foreign policy in the twenty-first century, the consequences of which will be explained in due course.

Belarusian Priorities

Belarus' main priority was the economy. The union offered a way out of the economic crisis, which saw GDP fall by 36 per cent between 1992-4.⁸² Reintegration was a means to minimise the shock of the collapse of the USSR⁸³ and avoid making reform,⁸⁴ which the Belarusian economic elite was not prepared to do.⁸⁵ This was beneficial on two levels. First, reform is painful; it takes time and risks causing an economic slump before long-term recovery can be established. Second, avoiding reform meant that the Belarusian government was able to keep industry and the command economy ticking over⁸⁶ – one of Lukashenka's main tools for holding on to power. When Russia offered economic help with no demands for market liberalism, integration was a no-brainer.

Integration also offered energy subsidies, which have always been a huge benefit for Belarus. Cheap energy means lower costs and thus rising living standards. If his people are happy and living well, Lukashenka remains a popular leader.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 9

⁸¹ Lynch 2005, p.114

⁸² Nikonov, p. 120

⁸³ Rontoyanni, p. 49

⁸⁴ M Balmaceda, 'Belarus: Oil, Gas, Transit Pipelines and Russian Foreign Energy Policy', *Institute for the Analysis of Global Security*, (London: GMB Publishing, 2006), p. 13

⁸⁵ P Duncan, 'Westernism, Eurasianism and Pragmatism: The Foreign Policies of the Post-Soviet States', in *The Legacy of the Soviet Union*, W Slater and A Wilson (eds.), (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 228-53, p. 244

⁸⁶ M Balmaceda, 'Myth and Reality in the Belarusian-Russian Relationship: What the West Must Know', in *Problems of Post-Communism*, 46(3), May-June 1999, p. 4

Furthermore, the union presented Lukashenka with the potential to become what would effectively be the ‘union president’. Although this was never to happen, he saw the integration process at its conception as a means to propel him to political superstardom.⁸⁷ Finally, Belarus was gaining security from integration with Russia.⁸⁸ With its staunch anti-NATO attitude and general hostility to the West, combining forces and establishing a military union with Russia has provided Belarus with a feeling of greater security in the face of the West.

Russian Priorities

Russian priorities have not been dissimilar from Belarusian ones. The main purpose for Russia was to establish security in the post-Soviet space and focus on military issues.⁸⁹ In 1996, with the introduction of Evgenii Primakov as foreign minister, a greater emphasis was placed on the integration of the CIS region,⁹⁰ which up until then had been largely – although not completely – neglected in favour of establishing ties with the West.⁹¹ The Russian government realised that it needed to reassert its influence in the post-Soviet sphere;⁹² Primakov’s strategy was to resist Western influence⁹³ in the region. Close integration with Belarus was a step towards achieving this resistance. However, this integration has not gone unchecked – many have criticised Russia for using it as a means to hold sway over the former Soviet

⁸⁷ U Markus, ‘Russia and Belarus: Elusive Integration’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, (Vol. 44, No. 5, September-October 1997), pp. 55-61, p. 55

⁸⁸ R Deyermond, ‘The State of the Union: Military Success, Economic and Political Failure in the Russia-Belarus Union’, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, (Vol. 56, No. 8, December 2004), pp. 1191-205, pp. 1194-6

⁸⁹ R Donaldson and J Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 4th Edition, (London: M E Sharpe, 2009), p. 208

⁹⁰ C Bruce, ‘Friction or Fiction? The Gas Factor in Russian-Belarusian Relations’, *Chatham House*, (Russia and Eurasia Programme Briefing Paper, May 2005), p. 3

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ B Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 75

states.⁹⁴ This policy persisted under Putin, despite his lack of enthusiasm for the union. Integration with Belarus can be viewed as a way that the former president has attempted to rebuild 'Greater Russia'.⁹⁵

Belarus is also a significant transit route for Russian energy heading towards the EU – 'Russia's most important economic partner'.⁹⁶ Without access to Belarus' transport routes, Russia would be alienated from Europe in both economic and geopolitical terms,⁹⁷ considering that Belarus is one of the last Eastern European countries to remain truly aligned to Russia.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Russia has an interest in securing Kaliningrad,⁹⁹ a Russian enclave sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. Belarus paves part of the way to the enclave and serves as its main transport route.¹⁰⁰ Through the policy of integration, Russia has been able to secure this supply route more confidently.

Why A Narrow Foreign Policy?

All these reasons make integration seem perfectly rational, but they do not explain why integration has had to be so *exclusive*. The benefits for Lukashenka have already been mentioned in this paper; a highly limited foreign policy helps maintain power over Belarus. But he is not the only one who enjoys his isolation, for Russia also has significant interests in cutting Belarus off from the rest of the world.

⁹⁴ O Sushko, 'The Dark Side of Integration: Ambitions of Domination in Russia's Backyard', *The Washington Quarterly*, (Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring 2004), p. 119

⁹⁵ Nygren 2008, pp. 3-4

⁹⁶ D Lynch, 'Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe', *The Washington Quarterly* (Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring 2004), pp. 99-118, p. 99

⁹⁷ H Perepelitsa, 'Belarusian-Russian Integration and its Impact on the Security of Ukraine' in *Belarus: At the Crossroads*, S W Garnett and R Legvold (eds.), (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 81-103, p. 81

⁹⁸ Sannikov, p. 226

⁹⁹ I Godin, 'Russia and Belorussia: Ten Years of Integration Incompatibility', in *Russian Politics and Law*, (Vol. 46, No. 2, March-April 2008), pp. 17-23, p. 21

¹⁰⁰ Trenin, p. 73

Belarus' isolation resists Western influence in the post-Soviet sphere. Cutting Belarus off from the international community has helped to resist encroaching Western organisations and eject any influence that may cause political upheaval. In the 1990s, this concern was focused on balancing NATO following the end of the Cold War. The concern continued under Putin's rule, but was no longer focused on NATO. The new millennium gave birth to the threat of 'colour' revolutions, which brought Western-focused leaders to power in Georgia and Ukraine. The open hostility that the Kremlin has displayed towards Ukraine and Georgia following their respective Orange and Rose Revolutions is telling of Russian feelings about the West throwing its weight around Russia's back yard.¹⁰¹ Clearly Moscow became a lot tougher towards Ukraine following the moment that Viktor Yushchenko took power.¹⁰²

Tighter integration and isolation helped quell the fear that Belarus might move towards democracy and a western-focused foreign policy similar to Georgia and Ukraine.¹⁰³ According to Thomas Ambrosio, letting Belarus fall under the influence of democracy would have 'dramatic reverberations in Russia and significant consequences for the Kremlin.'¹⁰⁴ By keeping the West out of Belarus, the risk of a colour revolution spreading to Russia is reduced.¹⁰⁵ In addition, if Russia were to lose Belarus to the West, Putin's great power rhetoric would begin to unravel. Even if one does not buy the idea of 'ejecting influence' from the former Soviet republics, the

¹⁰¹ This argument is not used here to advance theories of the emergence of a 'New Cold War'. True, relations between Russia and the West are at times chilly, but there is no evidence of old battles being revived. Russia simply does not enjoy the West meddling in its 'sphere of influence'.

¹⁰² J Roberts, 'Russia and the CIS: Energy Relations in the Wake of the Russia-Ukraine Gas Crisis', *European Union Institute for Security Studies* (ISS Opinion, February 2009)

¹⁰³ Ambrosio 2009, p. 114

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 105

¹⁰⁵ T Ambrosio, 'The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a "Color" Revolution', *Demokratizatsiya*, (Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 2006), pp. 407-434, p. 423

Kremlin would not be seen to support these Western-backed revolutions. Integration with Belarus has been at the very least a means of asserting his ‘ideological stance’.¹⁰⁶

How Has Integration Achieved This?

Integration has limited Belarusian foreign policy using ‘intentional’ methods, including Russian subsidies, the Kremlin’s disregard for electoral irregularities and support for an eastern identity. ‘Unintentional’ consequences of the integration process shall also be considered. For example, the union has managed to ‘squeeze out’ any other chances of establishing cross-border ties and has provoked the West even further, beyond its contempt for Lukashenka’s authoritarianism.

Economic Assistance

Russian economic assistance has helped to keep Western influence out of Belarus in four ways. Firstly, as already mentioned, it bolsters Lukashenka’s regime by keeping his command economy afloat and ensuring his popularity amongst Belarusians. In this way, Russia is actively supporting an autocratic and oppressive regime that does everything that it can to eject the West. Secondly, it has taken away any incentive for Lukashenka to diversify foreign policy. Thirdly, by offering economic help, Russia has gained a tight military union. Fourthly, the threat of removing energy subsidies has kept Belarus tied tightly to Russia in the past.

Russian economic assistance has come in the form of energy subsidies, beneficial trade relations and straightforward cash loans.¹⁰⁷ Belarus needs this kind of financial assistance if its unreformed economy has any chance of surviving. It has

¹⁰⁶ P Baev, *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power: Putin’s Quest for Greatness*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 147

¹⁰⁷ Ambrosio 2009, p. 117; Martinsen, p. 15

been Russia who has been prepared to support it by providing subsidies accounting for 20 per cent of Belarus' GDP,¹⁰⁸ buying up uncompetitive goods¹⁰⁹ and offering loans. With this kind of help, Belarus has not even needed to contemplate establishing dialogue with the West.¹¹⁰

By continually offering financial help, Russia has achieved political and military integration¹¹¹ and thus a tighter, more exclusive union. For example, a 1996 agreement resulted in Russia cancelling Belarus' energy debt in return for the free loan of 'two military communications objects'.¹¹² With Belarus as part of a secure military unit resisting NATO, Western influence has been countered more effectively.

Finally, as argued by many, Russia has used Belarus' energy dependence for political ends.¹¹³ Figures vary, but it is largely accepted that between 80-90 per cent of Belarusian energy comes from its eastern neighbour.¹¹⁴ This puts Belarus in a very weak position. Bertil Nygren is convinced that energy is being used by Russia as a means of punishment or reward for the behaviour of its weaker neighbours in order to integrate the former Soviet Union.¹¹⁵ The basic premise of this theory is that a country will do what Russia requests in order to avoid the punishment of an energy price hike.

In the past, Belarus has been able to counter threatened price increases by using its transit routes as a lever against Russia.¹¹⁶ However, this has not always proven successful as Russia has simply turned off the gas taps in order to put pressure on Belarus to give in, which is exactly what happened during the 2006/7 gas dispute. Russia managed to negotiate 50 percent of the ownership rights of Beltransgaz,

¹⁰⁸ Ambrosio 2009, p. 117

¹⁰⁹ Balmaceda 2006, p. 9

¹¹⁰ Rontoyanni, p. 60

¹¹¹ Balmaceda 2006, p. 1

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 8

¹¹³ Nygren 2008, p. 76

¹¹⁴ Balmaceda 2006, p 6-7

¹¹⁵ B Nygren, 'Putin's Use of Natural Gas to Reintegrate the CIS Region', *Problems of Post-Communism* (Vol. 55, No. 4, July/August 2006), pp. 3-15, p. 3

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 5

Belarus' energy transit company, and increased prices too, which will lead to Belarus paying world market prices by 2011.¹¹⁷

This use of 'petro-politics' has been a means of encouraging political loyalty in the past, and according to some, achieving 'greatness'.¹¹⁸ With regards to Belarus, low energy prices were likely to be a reward for staying isolated and keeping Western influence out,¹¹⁹ and an incentive to remain close to Russia in order to rebuild hegemony in the post-Soviet space. However, a problem now arises: if Belarus must pay world market prices in 2011, what incentive does it have to remain close to Russia and resist the West so strongly? This shall be fully analysed in the following chapter, but it also indicates that perhaps Russia has incentives other than maintaining its great power status in the region.

Russia's actions could be motivated by pure pragmatism. One can argue that cheap gas has been a means of securing transit routes¹²⁰ (as opposed to being an incentive to obey the Kremlin) and the removal of subsidies is a way of shaking off old Soviet relationships¹²¹ and securing higher prices for resources¹²² (as opposed to putting pressure on customers). Political analyst Stanislav Belkovskii states that 'Russia's current rulers are not bothered with political or geopolitical issues, they are typical businessmen.'¹²³ However, as Pavel Baev points out, 'the aims of profit

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 2006, p. 7

¹¹⁸ Baev, p. 117

¹¹⁹ D Marples, 'Is the Russia-Belarus Union Obsolete?', in *Problems of Post-Communism*, (Vol. 55, No.1, January-February 2008), pp. 25-35, p. 33

¹²⁰ Balmaceda 2006, p. 20

¹²¹ K Yafimava and J Stern, 'The 2007 Russia-Belarus Gas Agreement', *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies* (Oxford Energy Comment, January 2007)

¹²² J Perovic, 'Introduction: Russian Energy Power, Domestic and International Dimensions' in *Russian Energy Power and Foreign Relations: Implications for Conflict and Cooperation*, J Perovic, R W Orttung and A Wenger (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1-20, p. 9

¹²³ Interview with Stanislav Belkovskii, *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, 29 May 2009

maximization and building positions of power are barely distinguishable.’¹²⁴ There seems to be no watertight argument for either side.

A Blind Eye

Another method of limiting Western influence has been to disregard electoral irregularities and never demand democratic reform.¹²⁵ Putin has always congratulated Lukashenka on his past victories, for example, calling the 2001 win ‘convincing’.¹²⁶ Thomas Ambrosio states that ‘without the Kremlin’s support, it would have been far more difficult for Lukashenko to perpetrate his consistent electoral fraud’ and ‘brush off Western disapproval.’¹²⁷

Support for An Eastern Identity

Lukashenka has always used the idea of an eastern identity both to win over voters and to justify the isolation of his country from Europe and the Western model of democracy.¹²⁸ Russia has actively supported this eastward focus and fed the Slavic identity further by pursuing the integration programme with Belarus. Without this support from Russia, it would have become much more difficult for Lukashenka to reject the West.¹²⁹

Elimination of Other Options

George Dura explains how the West’s task of engaging with Belarus has been made more complicated by Russia’s dominance. He states that Russia’s ‘exclusivist

¹²⁴ Baev, p. 117

¹²⁵ Ambrosio, 2006, p. 6

¹²⁶ As quoted in Duncan, p. 244

¹²⁷ Ambrosio 2009, pp. 111, 116

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 123

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

approach... holds no room for a *ménage à trois* with the EU.’¹³⁰ This is quite true. The overbearing weight of the Russia Belarus Union makes it incredibly difficult for any other possible foreign ties to be considered. The more that Belarus has looked towards Russia and developed a dependency on its eastern neighbour, the more that Belarus has isolated itself from the rest of the international community¹³¹ and denied itself the chance of looking for other potential external partners.¹³²

In addition, Russia has forced Belarus to integrate on the Kremlin’s terms¹³³ due to Belarusian dependency. This includes foreign policy, which has traditionally ‘mirrored’ that of Russia.¹³⁴ For example, following the 1999 Kosovo war, a two-year agreement concerning foreign policy co-ordination was implemented.¹³⁵ Even if he had wanted to, Lukashenka has not been able to diverge from Moscow’s line and make independent foreign policy choices.

Provocation of the West

The relationship that emerged between Belarus and Russia antagonised the West.¹³⁶ It was felt that the relationship smacked of the Soviet days and seemed threatening to the US following the end of the Cold War. A Russia intent on keeping hold of the former Soviet Union and developing strong military bonds with Belarus was not perceived well and hostility towards Belarus strengthened, jeopardising potential engagement.

¹³⁰ Dura, p. 2-3

¹³¹ Perepelitsa, p. 91

¹³² Danilovich, p.1

¹³³ Perepelitsa, p. 88

¹³⁴ Petro and Rubinstein, p.123

¹³⁵ Nygren 2008, pp. 75-6

¹³⁶ Legvold, pp. 140-1

Concluding Remarks

In sum, Russia has offered Belarus an alternative option in terms of diplomatic, political, economic and strategic support.¹³⁷ This support has denied Belarus the need to diversify its foreign policy options and has also bolstered an authoritarian regime that actively seeks a policy of self-isolation. Furthermore, Russia has forced Belarusian isolation in more aggressive ways through the use of ‘petro-politics’. Alienation from the international community has served Russian interests insofar as it has helped serve as a counterbalance to Western influence in the former Soviet space and prevent the possibility of a democratic revolution from taking place in a neighbouring country.

¹³⁷ Ambrosio 2009, p. 109

4. Change for Belarus?

In the years 2007-9, Belarusian foreign policy has widened, with some critics believing that Belarus is ‘sailing off to new geopolitical shores’.¹³⁸ In May 2009, following a squabble with Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin over a loan instalment, Lukashenka boldly announced that Belarus can look elsewhere for support: ‘If it doesn’t work out with Russia, there is no need to beg, whinge or cry. We’ll have to look for our happiness in another part of the world.’¹³⁹

The follow up to this declaration occurred in July 2009 after Russia had enforced a ban on Belarusian dairy products and Lukashenka had in turn boycotted a summit for the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).¹⁴⁰ In the wake of these antagonisms, Lukashenka declared that the Russian Belarus Union was an ‘unfinished project’ and should be shelved. He asserted that he therefore wants to establish deeper co-operation with the EU and trade links with the US.¹⁴¹

How and why has this happened? Belarus has spent most of its independent existence as an isolated state, dealing exclusively with Russia. Logically, one or more of the constraints on Belarusian foreign policy must have given in order to allow Lukashenka’s regime to open up. Here it will be argued that it is less a case of Lukashenka becoming more open to democratic notions (despite ostensible improvements) but more to do with the deterioration of Russian-Belarusian relations – as the above incidents show – and a more comprehensive policy on the part of the EU.

¹³⁸ Discussion, *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, 28 May 2009

¹³⁹ *RFE/RL*, ‘Belarus Leader Says Will Not Beg Russia For Loans’, 29 May 2009, www.rferl.org/content/Belarus_Leader_Says_Will_Not_Beg_Russia_For_Loans/1742716.html

¹⁴⁰ T Halpin, ‘Belarus Strongman Alexander Lukashenko Takes on Ally Russia in “Milk War”’, *Times Online*, 15 June 2009, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6499866.ece

¹⁴¹ V Solovev, ‘Belorussii Proiavila nepriznatel’nost’’, *Kommersant*, 24 July 2009, www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1209249

Deterioration in Russian-Belarusian Relations

The Union State has never achieved its original aims of deep political and economic integration, leading some critics to describe it as no more than ‘a scrap of paper’.¹⁴² The faltering relationship and the myths concerning healthy, happy integration have been charted over a huge amount of literature,¹⁴³ which explains that integration has amounted to little more than rhetoric and illusion. It is acknowledged that military integration has been successful, but even this is relative to the union’s political and economic failures.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, both countries have continued to fan the dying flames of the union as they consider it worth pursuing for all the reasons laid out here. However, it appears that today the relationship could really be running into trouble – according to Belkovskii, the relationship is currently at its worst state in ten years.¹⁴⁵ As a result, new options for the West to engage with Belarus are appearing as the country is slowly released from its shackles.

Old Grievances

The relationship has always seemed doomed by certain grievances. From the outset there was a direct collision of interests. Russia’s reluctance to meet the economic costs of the union (the Kremlin has long viewed Lukashenka as a parasite) and to grant Lukashenka equal status¹⁴⁶ has been met head on with Lukashenka’s desire for a bail out and the expectation of being elevated to the same level as the Russian president.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Lo, p. 76

¹⁴³ See for example, Balmaceda 1999; Lo; Markus

¹⁴⁴ Deyermond

¹⁴⁵ Discussion, *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, 28 May 2009

¹⁴⁶ Markus, p. 55

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 59

Lukashenka has thus always had a chip on his shoulder because of Russia's lack of commitment to an equal union.¹⁴⁸ In 2002 Putin offered either to incorporate Belarus into the Russian Federation or establish a union based on the EU.¹⁴⁹ These offers were highly insulting to the man who had harboured dreams of reaching the lofty heights of 'union president'. Likewise, hesitancy over financial handouts has infuriated the Belarusian president, as shown by the May 2009 outburst.

Other issues include the conflict between Russia's market liberalism and 'democracy' and Belarus state-run economy and autocracy. This has limited co-operation and caused tension between the two countries;¹⁵⁰ shaking hands with dictators is never viewed favourably by the international community. Not only has the Belarusian economy been incompatible with the Russian model, but also its inefficiency has proven to be a burden.¹⁵¹ When the economy has faltered, Russia has appeared less keen on integration,¹⁵² which was exactly why Kudrin questioned the loan payment.

Does Russia Need This Embarrassment?

Bearing these issues in mind, the time has come for Russia to decide whether it really needs to hold onto this parasitic embarrassment. In 2009, many of the arguments for integration are no longer strong enough to justify the intensity of the relationship, especially when the pragmatic Putin is still holding the reins in the Kremlin.

The rationale that Belarus and Russia need to combine forces and balance the power of NATO has lost some of its clout. Dmitri Trenin argues that the idea of

¹⁴⁸ Marples 2008, p. 31

¹⁴⁹ Deyermond, p. 1198

¹⁵⁰ Sannikov, p. 226

¹⁵¹ Martinsen, p. 33

¹⁵² Donaldson and Noguee, p. 209

protecting Russia from a NATO invasion is reflective of a ‘long-bygone era’.¹⁵³ A shift in Russo-Western relations following the September 11 attacks led to a rapprochement between NATO and Russia in 2002¹⁵⁴ as both ‘sides’ saw the need to co-operate on the subsequent War on Terror. Margarita Balmaceda has suggested that ‘Lukashenkism can only exist... in an atmosphere of enmity and suspicion’.¹⁵⁵ Has a warming in relations rendered Lukashenka useless to the Kremlin? However, the argument that Russia wishes to keep Belarus tied in an exclusive relationship still applies to the threat of a colour revolution and the ability for Russia to justify its image as a powerful actor in a multi-polar world.

Belarus is also losing its significance as an energy transit route. As well as now owning half of Beltransgaz, Russia is attempting to avoid transit through Belarus entirely. Following the gas disputes in 2004 and 2006 when Belarus tried to resist price increases by halting transit to Europe, it became clear that Belarus was an unreliable partner. Russia halted plans to construct a second line for Yamal,¹⁵⁶ the main pipeline running through Belarus. It is now ploughing on with plans for Nord Stream – a pipeline that will run under the Baltic Sea to serve European customers, circumnavigating Belarus. Russia will no longer need to win Belarus’ political loyalty if this is completed.

Financial Betrayal

Significant turning points for Belarus were the aforementioned ‘gas wars’. Following the 2004 dispute Lukashenka proclaimed that ‘our relations will now be

¹⁵³ Trenin, p. 68

¹⁵⁴ Martinsen, pp. 37-8

¹⁵⁵ Balmaceda 1999, p. 7

¹⁵⁶ Dura, p. 3

poisoned with gas for a long time to come.’¹⁵⁷ Following this, and then the part-privatisation of Beltransgaz and increase in energy prices after the 2006 dispute, Lukashenka felt betrayed.¹⁵⁸ Price increases are a big deal. Lukashenka needs cheap energy to win support and keep his clunking economy going. The 50 percent takeover of Beltransgaz is also evidence of a looming threat. Russia has always wanted to privatise the Belarusian economy – a goldmine to oligarchs. Stripping Belarus of state control would severely limit Lukashenka’s power. In addition, the fact that Finance Minister Kudrin was reluctant to hand over the loan instalment showed, from a Belarusian point of view, that Russia is no longer to be trusted as a partner, even if a valid point had been made.

Implications

The rising tensions in relations have had significant consequences. Lukashenka has been insulted and felt let down by Russia and is therefore considering new options. The gas disputes have also highlighted how precarious his situation is – Lukashenka knows that it is in his best interests to diversify and lessen his dependence on Russia. From Russia’s perspective, the cost of keeping Lukashenka sweet and afloat seems to be outweighing the benefits that he brings. Russian support for Belarus is thus no longer a given, which puts Lukashenka’s regime in grave danger. The Belarusian economy is not sustainable since it is highly inefficient, depending on cheap energy and Russia buying up uncompetitive products. Furthermore, domestic support for Lukashenka is falling. If the regime is to survive, Belarus will have to look elsewhere for financial and political support, which is why,

¹⁵⁷ As quoted in Donaldson and Noguee, p. 211

¹⁵⁸ Marples 2008, p. 31

as Belkovskii states, Belarus 'has started actively drifting towards the European Union, the Eastern Partnership, new sources of legitimacy.'¹⁵⁹

Internal Changes

However, Lukashenka must first become an acceptable partner for the West. Democratic and economic reform is an absolute necessity to achieve this. This study has shown how authoritarianism and a command economy have acted as constraints on Belarus' foreign policy options. Now is the time to remove these constraints.

In the run-up to the 2008 presidential elections, Lukashenka released political prisoners and allowed the publication of two opposition newspapers.¹⁶⁰ Although not a single opposition candidate won a seat as a result of these elections, the West acknowledged the nod towards democracy. Then in June 2009, the Belarusian government released a US lawyer from prison and issued an official pardon.¹⁶¹ By making these gestures Belarus is attempting to win the favour of those whose help he needs.

Lukashenka has also been able to woo the West by taking a step away from the Kremlin.¹⁶² Following Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, the Belarusian government did not recognise the Georgian enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, as Russia would have expected. Not only has this led to further deterioration in relations between Belarus and Russia but has also proven that Belarus no longer parrots Russian foreign policy. As this is a major point of contention

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Stanislav Belkovskii, *Ekho Moskvy Radio*, 29 May 2009

¹⁶⁰ C Neef, 'The Belarusian Gambler: Europe's New Eastern Friend', *Spiegel Online*, 5 June 2009, www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,15518,druck-623269,00.html

¹⁶¹ *RIA Novosti*, 'U.S. Lawyer Freed from Belarus Jail on Pardon', 1 July 2009, www.en.rian.ru/world/20090701/155400273.html

¹⁶² H Turek, 'A New Direction for Belarus?', *RUSI Newsbrief*, (Vol. 29, No. 6, June 2009), pp. 68-9, p. 68

between the West and Russia, Lukashenka has shown that his loyalties no longer lie exclusively with the Kremlin.

In the past it was always considered that ‘Lukashenka has nowhere to turn’,¹⁶³ but new openness to democracy means that there may be new foreign policy options to consider. Although the motive for reform is neither a concern with human rights nor a belief in democracy, but fear of a collapsing regime, the moves should still be welcomed.

New Western Policy

Following the slightly more ‘free and fair’ elections in October 2008, the EU has decided that Lukashenka is no longer unacceptable.¹⁶⁴ For the first time, Belarus has been included in a framework for co-operation with European non-member states – the Eastern Partnership. In addition, visa bans have been lifted. In 2009 Lukashenka visited the Pope and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. This is groundbreaking considering that he had not been to Western Europe for eleven years.¹⁶⁵ The final constraint on Belarusian foreign policy is lifted as the West establishes dialogue.

The Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership was launched in May 2009 at a summit in Prague. It is the EU’s latest effort to establish political and economic co-operation with six former Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus,

¹⁶³ Trenin, p. 78

¹⁶⁴ Discussion, *Ekho Moskvyy Radio*, 28 May 2009

¹⁶⁵ Neef

encouraging reform and stability.¹⁶⁶ The project can be considered an improvement on past Western policies – most notably because Belarus has been included on this occasion. Although the €600 million directed towards the project can be described as ‘meagre’, the EP will negotiate loans from the International Monetary Fund to help these countries weather the global recession that began in 2008.¹⁶⁷ Thus at face value the sum may not seem very much, but it should not be spat at.

Problems Still Exist

Despite the benefits of this new plan, it is riddled with downfalls. For example, the EU still lacks co-ordination and consensus,¹⁶⁸ the scourge of past policy. For example, Sweden, Belgium and Holland are actively opposed to the new policy towards Belarus¹⁶⁹ and the fact that French President Nicholas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown were absent from the summit in Prague undermines the coherence of the project.¹⁷⁰ A lack of commitment prevails, as many in the West still do not trust Mr Lukashenka.

But it is not only EU members who remain cagey. Lukashenka did not even turn up to the summit and Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko stated that Belarus has absolutely no intention of joining the EU.¹⁷¹ If Belarus is still keeping its distance, is rapprochement ever going to be possible? Finally, are the EU’s moves actually concerned with Belarus? Perhaps Europe is only motivated by

¹⁶⁶ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, ‘Eastern Partnership’, Brussels, 3 December 2008; The Council of the European Union, ‘Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit’, Prague, 7 May 2009

¹⁶⁷ T Barber, ‘Why Eastern Diplomacy Requires a Careful Tailor’, *Financial Times*, 4 May 2009

¹⁶⁸ J Eyal, ‘Eastern Partnerships, Eternal Illusions’, *RUSI Newsbrief*, (Vol. 29, No. 5, May 2009), pp. 49-50

¹⁶⁹ Neef

¹⁷⁰ A Rettman, ‘EU Leaders Soothe Russia Over New Eastern Club’, *EUobserver.com*, 07 May 2009, www.euobserver.com/9/28090

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

securing overall stability in the region and challenging Russia's energy superpower status, as opposed to encouraging genuine reform in Belarus.¹⁷²

A Bit of Positivity?

But despite the problems associated with the new policy, the main hurdle has been jumped – the West and Belarus have begun to talk and there are no political sanctions.¹⁷³ Critics can poke holes in any policy if they choose, but details can be worked out in due course. Lukashenka no longer has his pretext to isolate Belarus and the West may slowly regain levers of influence in the country.

Problems for Lukashenka

Even if the West's new engagement were to be flawless, there would still be one huge issue at hand. In order for Lukashenka to seek ties with the West, he must carry out reform, which he has made some tentative steps to do. However, this is exactly what they are – tentative steps. They are simply gestures in order to please. Real engagement and acceptance from sceptical EU members is going to require more than cosmetic improvements. It will require genuinely free and fair elections and the development of a market economy.

However, such reforms are extremely problematic for Lukashenka. Political and economic control are his two main power bases, and if he adopts democracy and liberalism to the extent necessary to forge genuine ties with the West, then he will lose his grip on Belarus.¹⁷⁴ Free and fair elections could very well spell the end of his

¹⁷² Turek, p. 68

¹⁷³ Eyal, p. 49

¹⁷⁴ Ambrosio 2006, p. 422

presidency,¹⁷⁵ considering his declining popularity and the growing support for the opposition.¹⁷⁶ He thus faces an enormous dilemma; resist reform and attempt to survive on dwindling Russian support or forge ties with the West and risk losing power. Whichever way one looks at it, the Lukashenka regime is in danger.

This is why Lukashenka's 'reforms' are more than likely to be superficial. His main concern is regime survival and reform is certainly not a means of achieving this. Thus the gestures are nothing more than short-term efforts to find new friends as his entente with Russia crumbles. He will act in his own interests in the attempt to keep hold of power. Whether he is to be successful is yet to be known.

Concluding Remarks

Constraints on Belarusian foreign policy have been in a process of evolution over the years 2007-2009. Firstly, the relationship with Russia is slowly deteriorating. Secondly, the regime in Belarus is taking a step away from Russia and making democratic overtures, albeit very small ones. Thirdly, the EU has adapted its policy, removing the constraint of counterproductive isolation.

In line with these changes, an improvement to the range of Belarus' foreign policy options is taking place. However, it is worth considering whether relations with Russia are actually deteriorating or whether they are just going through a rough patch. Belarus has a habit of running crying to the West when times are tough with Russia (for example following the gas disputes in 2004 and 2006) only to return following a cooling off period.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ A Naumczuk et al., 'The Forgotten Neighbour – Belarus in the Context of EU Enlargement to the East', *Stefan Batory Foundation*, (On the Future of Europe Policy Papers 4, Warsaw, September 2001), p. 10

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Dura, p. 6

By examining these changes, it is clear that Belarus' relationship with Russia has been the biggest constraint following the collapse of communism. The deterioration in the alliance has been the impetus for change. It is only due to the decline in support from Russia that Belarus has seen the need to change its course of direction by making democratic improvements, and it is only because of these improvements that the EU has been prepared to lift its exclusionist approach towards Belarus.

Conclusion

Robin Shepherd hits the nail on the head when he states that the relationship between the West and Belarus can be characterised as ‘mutually re-enforcing self-isolation’.¹⁷⁸ Lukashenka’s regime seeks isolation as a way of clamping down on the country and the West isolates the regime for this very reason. The only way that the status quo could have changed was if the third factor in the equation – Russia – had shaken things up.

Which is precisely what has happened since the Kremlin realised that Lukashenka was no longer a necessary ally and began to remove energy subsidies and stopped providing loans at any cost to the Belarusian government. In this way, Russia took away the shelter that Lukashenka has been able to hide under, forcing him to consider opening up his regime. For this very reason, it is possible to argue that Russian support and integration has been the greatest constraint on Belarus’ foreign policy options since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, on the other hand, Lukashenka is the root cause of the situation. If a democratic and forward-thinking politician had come to power in 1994, then Russia would not have had the opportunity to keep such a strong hold on the country. Belarus might have even ended up in a similar situation to the Baltic States today. However, it is important not to forget Belarus’ strong Soviet legacy before making such assumptions.

The West has served to isolate Belarus, though only insofar as its policy has exacerbated a situation that was already underway. The EU and the US have never *desired* Belarus’ isolation, unlike other forces at work. Even if the West had compromised its values and engaged with Belarus prior to reform, then not only

¹⁷⁸ R Shepherd, ‘Belarus: What Is to Be Done?’, *Institute for Security Studies* (Summary Review: Chaillot Paper, No. 85, November 2005)

would the West have sold out, but also there would have been no guarantee that Lukashenka would have entered dialogue anyway.

Where Now for Belarus?

It is not yet clear how the Belarus story is going to end. It really is unlikely that Belarus under Lukashenka will ever embrace enough reform to be accepted as a partner by the West. It is also quite possible that there may be a rapprochement between Belarus and Russia if it is in their interests to overcome their differences. But can Belarus not look both East and West? This is no longer the Cold War and compromises can be reached, even if Lukashenka does not embrace democracy and liberalism in the way that the EU and the US would ideally like him to.

And what about life after Lukashenka? How much longer does he even have left? Lukashenka's most loyal supporters are the older part of the population who have strong memories of the Soviet days, or even the Second World War.¹⁷⁹ These people are not going to be around forever and a new generation is beginning to find itself on the fringes of political influence.¹⁸⁰ Domestic support for Lukashenka is fading and democratic forces are gaining ground in Belarus. Only when these forces enter power in Belarus will a true shift in foreign policy occur and the country can end its isolation engage with the rest of the world. However, when will this be?

¹⁷⁹ D Marples 2007, p. 6

¹⁸⁰ Zurawski vel Grajewski, p. 92

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