

DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN BELARUS: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION



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Co-Chairs: A. Wess Mitchell, David J. Kramer

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Center for European Policy Analysis
1225 19th Street, NW
Suite 450
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: (202) 551-9200
E-mail: info@cepa.org
www.cepa.org

Freedom House
1301 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Floor 6
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: (202) 296-5101
E-mail: info@freedomhouse.org
www.freedomhouse.org

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Democratic Change in Belarus

Working Group Report Contributors*

A. Wess Mitchell, Co-Chair

Center for European Policy
Analysis

David J. Kramer, Co-Chair

Freedom House

Peter B. Doran, Project Manager

Center for European Policy
Analysis

Victor Ashe

Former U.S. Ambassador to
Poland

Laurence E. Hirsch

Center for European Policy
Analysis

Robert Nurick

Atlantic Council

Anders Åslund

Peterson Institute for International
Economics

Donald Jensen

Center for Transatlantic Relations,
Johns Hopkins-SAIS

Gabriela Paskova
Center for European Policy
Analysis

Ellen Bork

Foreign Policy Initiative

James Kirchick

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Rodger Potocki
National Endowment for
Democracy

Ian Brzezinski

Atlantic Council

Dakota Korth

Halifax International Security
Forum

Cynthia Romero

Atlantic Council

Susan Corke

Freedom House

Irina Krasovskaya

We Remember Foundation

Kurt Volker
Center for Transatlantic Relations,
Johns Hopkins-SAIS

Pavol Demeš

German Marshall Fund

David A. Merkel

Former U.S. Deputy Assistant
Secretary of State

Damon Wilson

Atlantic Council

Joerg Forbrig

German Marshall Fund

Stephen Nix

International Republican Institute

S. Enders Wimbush

German Marshall Fund

*In preparing this report, the authors consulted a wide array of experts, practitioners and policymakers. In addition to these consultations, the individuals above contributed to the report's preparation. Contributors support the thrust of the report, though not necessarily every recommendation. They are not responsible for the opinions expressed throughout this document. Institutional affiliations are for purposes of identification only.

PREFACE

The ongoing political crackdown in Belarus has intensified Western attention to “Europe’s last dictatorship.” Since the onset of this repression following the December 2010 presidential elections, the economic and political situation inside the country has deteriorated and Belarus’ dictatorial leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka faces his gravest crisis to date. These developments call for robust U.S. and European Union (EU) engagement which should aim to accomplish two goals: 1) catalyze positive democratic change in the country and 2) lay the groundwork for a transition to a post-Lukashenka Belarus. In order to boost the transatlantic effort to fashion a Western policy roadmap for the country, the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and Freedom House launched an expert Working Group in June 2011 under the auspices of CEPA’s *Eastern Lights* Program. Co-chaired by CEPA’s A. Wess Mitchell and Freedom House’s David J. Kramer, this investigative review has gathered contributions from a bipartisan and transatlantic group of leading scholars, analysts and issue experts to identify sustainable and impactful strategies for promoting democratic reform inside Belarus.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

TRACK I: CATALYZING POSITIVE DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

In the Economic Sphere:

- **Privatization**

Not all sales should be final (or perceived as such). Should Lukashenka attempt to extend his rule by selling off the country's valuable economic assets, he would weaken Belarus' independence and stability. This is especially true if the sale of state-owned enterprises is concluded below their fair market value. Belarusian opposition groups and civic leaders should call into question the validity of these potential sales in advance and commit to reviewing them under a post-Lukashenka government — with the prospect of invalidating the asset transfers.³

- **Economic Sanctions**

Intensify pressure on the regime through economic sanctions. The international community should continue its efforts to eliminate revenue channels that support the current government by sealing off access to funds in offshore accounts. In addition to the current list of individuals and companies under visa bans, asset freezes and sanctions, the United States and the EU could help by imposing economic sanctions against other enterprises as well, further reducing their attractiveness and value to prospective buyers like Russia. More robust sanctions could include businesses linked to the regime, such as the state arms manufacturer BelTechExport (in the case of the United States), the potash company Belaruskali, pipeline operator

³ A similar process occurred following the ouster of former President Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine. This involved the resale of Kryvorizhstal, Ukraine's largest integrated steel company, following a disputed privatization scheme.

Beltransgaz, mobile phone company MTS Belarus, the Minsk Automotive Company and the Mozyr Oil Refinery.

- **Assistance from the IMF**

Shape perceptions on financial bailouts. With the economy in freefall, Lukashenka is pinning his hopes on a Western financial bailout and is certainly suggesting such a deal is in the offing — even if, in reality, it is not. The United States and EU Members should state clearly and publicly their opposition to any assistance from international financial institutions, such as the IMF, without the unconditional release of all political prisoners. Since an IMF bailout at this point could have the unintended consequence of extending the lifespan of Lukashenka's rule, the international community should send a strong message to both the opposition and members of the regime: Western help is not coming to save the current government.⁴

In the Political Sphere:

- **Political Prisoners**

Secure the release of all political prisoners. In response to the ongoing crackdown, both the United States and the EU have demonstrated strong leadership in calling for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. Securing their freedom, as well as expanding channels to assist in the legal defense of detainees and expedite support for their families, should be an immediate priority for the international community.

⁴ See Ales Daschinski and Richard Solash, "Belarus Opposition Leaders Hail U.S. Senators' Tough Stance On Lukashenka," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 3, 2011.

- **The Democratic Opposition**

Extend direct support to Belarus' pro-democratic groups. Western policymakers should continue their efforts to open the political space and support Belarus' pro-democratic groups, civil society and independent journalists. The United States and EU Members have already pledged more than \$100 million in financial, technical and commodities assistance. We recommend that Western governments now expedite the flow of these resources to Belarus' civil society groups as well as to political parties in the democratic opposition inside the country.

- **Civil Society Organizations**

Galvanize the links between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the population. Currently these linkages are very weak, a result of the relentless — and to some degree successful — efforts by the regime to undermine civil society in Belarus. Simultaneously, it is necessary to broaden and align the work of CSOs with the needs of the population. Notwithstanding the inherent security risks for individuals who work with CSOs — concerns that can diminish broad-based civic participation — such groups should focus their efforts on connecting with the population. By doing so, CSOs would be in a position to close the gap with segments of society that have remained on the sidelines. If successful, this approach would ultimately strengthen and expand the platform for civic activism in Belarus.

- **Targeting Western Assistance**

Look for opportunities to share best practices and effective techniques among the recipients of Western assistance. Following the political crackdown, financial aid from the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) is being retooled to domestic civil society groups. Likewise, European officials are now actively engaging with the recipients of this assistance to insure that it is tailored for on-the-ground needs. Since 2006, a group of more than 50 donors and practitioners have come together through the Belarusian International Implementers Meeting (BIIM) to coordinate and improve funding allocations. Taken together with other venues, such as the Vilnius

Roundtable Format, these mechanisms are vital for ensuring that the right type of aid reaches the right people and organizations.

- **Breaking the Information Blockade**

Media outreach and surrogate broadcasting through platforms such as BelSat television, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, European Radio for Belarus, Voice of America, as well as other online/social media initiatives, are helping to break the regime's information blockade. While the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011 — now under consideration by the U.S. Senate — correctly emphasizes the important role these programs play, Western policymakers should seek to expand the appeal and reach of surrogate broadcasts inside the country, including dissemination in all languages that Belarusians speak.

TRACK II: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A POST-LUKASHENKA BELARUS

In the Economic Sphere:

- **Plan Now, Move Quickly**

Western governments and institutions should prepare now for transition in Belarus. In order to help a post-Lukashenka government during the early phases of economic transition, Western governments and financial institutions should prepare their response strategies now, so as to provide rapid and comprehensive assistance to Belarusian officials. This includes setting out what the international community is prepared to offer a post-Lukashenka Belarus as a further incentive to affect change from within the current regime.

- **Apply Lessons from Central Europe**

Post-Lukashenka Belarus should draw on Central Europe's experience. Based on similar transitions in the region, Belarus will likely face a number of well-known challenges as it begins the long-delayed process of economic reform. The most pressing of these potential obstacles will be the need to stabilize foreign trade and macroeconomic imbalances, prevent the onset of hyper-inflation, fully liberalize domestic supply chains and disassemble large state monopolies. In addressing

these and other obstacles, Central Europe’s think-tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be in a unique position to help. Many have already distinguished themselves as some of the most experienced and active European organizations working in Belarus. Going forward, these organizations could serve as a vast reservoir of regional expertise regarding best practices and lessons learned in the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

- **Create Opportunities for Entrepreneurs**

A key element of any economic transition will be to spur investment in small- and medium-sized enterprises. Over the past decade, models such as the Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF), the Polish-American Enterprise Fund, the Baltic-American Enterprise Fund and the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund have been successful in stimulating economic opportunity and growth in nations of the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. Similar funds have been contemplated in the wake of democratic transitions in the Middle East. To date, however, Belarus has not received funding from the WNISEF. In a post-Lukashenka environment, policymakers could establish a new enterprise fund for Belarus. Since past successful funds have provided an exceptional return on a modest investment of public dollars, a future enterprise fund for Belarus could replicate this model. Led by experienced private sector board members, such a fund could also be structured to repay the U.S. Treasury after a reinvestment cycle. Finally, the possibility of creating a non-profit legacy foundation, one supported through capital from the original WNISEF investment, could also be explored in the near-term. Although not currently in place, such a project could serve as a platform for providing high-quality business education and foster entrepreneurship through targeted people-to-people exchanges.

In the Political Sphere:

- **Focus on Sustained Democratization**

Elections and democratic institutions should develop in tandem. Belarus’ potential transformation from “Europe’s last dictatorship”

to “Europe’s newest democracy” will require more than just internationally recognized elections. It will also necessitate the elimination of repressive state security measures; the establishment of robust protection mechanisms for independent media and civil society; and allow respect for the rule of law and a culture of transparency and openness to take root in government. In a post-Lukashenka environment, the aim of Western policymakers should be to help the Belarusian people retain their independence while avoiding the potential for democratic backsliding over the long-term.

- **Make the Case for Values *and* Strategic Interests**

Western policymakers, particularly in the United States, should frame the outcome of a transition in Belarus in terms of values and long-term strategic interests. Thus far, ample — and necessary — attention has been directed at improving the human rights situation in Belarus. At the same time, relatively little work has been devoted to articulating the country’s geostrategic importance to Europe and the United States. A pro-Western, democratic, free market Belarus would place considerably less strain on the stability and security outlook of key NATO allies in the region. In preparing the groundwork for a post-Lukashenka Belarus, the Western policy community should elevate Belarus’ strategic importance for the EU and the United States, alongside values-based priorities like democratization.

- **Mentor Future Leaders**

Engage tomorrow’s leaders among today’s opposition. Members of the current Belarusian political opposition and leaders of civil society groups will likely fill the ranks of a future Belarusian government (should Lukashenka flee the country or be removed from power). In anticipation of that day, current assistance programs aimed at bolstering the capacity of Belarus’ embattled opposition should also look to identify future Belarusian leaders and increase Western contacts through career mentoring and exchange programs. The experiences and professional relationships developed through these exchanges could one day play a vital role in helping a cadre of young

Belarusian leaders guide their country toward a prosperous, democratic future.

- **People-to-People Exchanges**

At the grass-roots level, people-to-people exchanges should remain a core pillar of Western engagement. These efforts should include steps to streamline access to visas for Belarusian citizens as well as sustained support for educational initiatives offered through the European Humanities University and the Kirkland and Kalinowski Scholarships. While the latter provides opportunities for Belarusians to study in Poland, similar programs also exist to facilitate foreign study in Estonia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. In the case of the United States, the Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship provides educational exchange opportunities for graduate-level students in Belarus. However, the highly-successful Fulbright Program does not currently offer similar avenues for Belarusian undergraduates. This represents a notable gap in U.S.-based people-to-people outreach, one which policymakers in Washington should seek to close. Other avenues for U.S.-based people-to-people exchanges could focus on targeted programs for higher education institutions specializing in Belarus, including for example, the Center for Belarusian Studies at the Southwestern College in Kansas.

SECTION I: BACKGROUND

Two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the persistence of an unreconstructed dictatorship on Europe's doorstep represents unfinished business for Western governments and the people of Belarus. After being elected president in 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka systematically consolidated his political power, steadfastly resisted reforms of the dysfunctional communist-era economy and persistently denied Belarusians basic rights and freedoms. Whereas neighboring states in Central and Eastern Europe embarked upon a transition to liberal markets, open societies and closer ties with the EU and NATO, the political environment in Belarus deteriorated significantly. Two years after Lukashenka's election, the country was downgraded to "Not Free" on Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* survey. To this day, Belarus continues to be ranked among the *World's Most Repressive Societies*.³

THE PERSISTENCE OF AN UNRECONSTRUCTED DICTATORSHIP ON EUROPE'S DOORSTEP REPRESENTS UNFINISHED BUSINESS FOR WESTERN GOVERNMENTS AND THE PEOPLE OF BELARUS.

Since the disintegration of the communist bloc, the transatlantic community has made significant progress in achieving the long-standing vision of Europe "whole, free and at peace."⁴ Yet that historic mission is not entirely complete, especially as it

³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011*. Available here: <http://bit.ly/okSSWY>.

⁴ President George H.W. Bush, "Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz," May 31, 1989. Available here: <http://bit.ly/p9d2JG>.

pertains to Belarus. While the risk of democratic backsliding — or outright rollback — has resurfaced across the entire post-Soviet region, in Belarus the policy puzzle for Western governments is different.⁵ Following the collapse of the Soviet system, Belarus' transition to democratic governance and market liberalization never got off the ground. As such, the current challenge for Western officials and pro-democratic forces inside Belarus is to catalyze positive change, the kind that will allow the country to assume its rightful place among the community of market-orientated European democracies.

It is for this reason that Belarus' presidential election in December 2010 represents a significant inflection point in the country's political development. During the 18 months leading up to the vote, Western governments seized on signals that Lukashenka's strong-armed regime might finally be induced to undertake the needed reforms. Hoping to encourage progress, the EU invited Lukashenka to participate in the inaugural Summit of the Eastern Partnership Initiative in Prague, 2009; and both Washington and Brussels relaxed the travel and financial restrictions that had previously been placed on Belarusian officials. As the presidential election drew near, the regime allowed nine opposition candidates to run for office, granting them rare — if limited — access to national media.

Western diplomatic engagement with Minsk culminated in a November 2010 visit by Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Radosław Sikorski and German Foreign Affairs Minister Guido Westerwelle. During the trip, Sikorski and Westerwelle offered the Belarusian government the opportunity to end its estrangement with the West and reap \$4.3 billion of EU financial assistance in the process. In exchange, the regime needed only to offer a sign of

⁵ Except in the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), which became members of the EU in 2004.

good faith by conducting the upcoming presidential election in closer compliance with international standards and allowing greater room for human rights for its citizens.

Unfortunately, the early indications of a possible political thaw proved to be a false spring. The subsequent presidential election in Belarus failed to meet internationally recognized benchmarks for electoral transparency and fairness. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as well as independent domestic observers judged the election to be woefully deficient on both fronts. While pre-election polls indicated that Lukashenka may not have enjoyed enough support to win an outright victory in the first round, the official government count granted him nearly 80 percent of the ballot.⁶ Western governments refused to recognize the outcome, leaving officials in Minsk to govern without a legitimately established mandate in the view of the United States and Europe.

THE EARLY INDICATIONS OF A POSSIBLE POLITICAL THAW PROVED TO BE A FALSE SPRING.

When tens of thousands of Belarusians turned out on election night to protest the flawed vote, the regime unleashed a violent wave of suppression of democratic opposition groups, civil society organizations and independent media.⁷ Hundreds of protesters and leading opposition figures were arrested, including seven of the presidential candidates. Many of these individuals have since been sentenced to lengthy prison terms by a judicial system that has long been a political tool abused by

⁶ David Marples, "Belarusians Want Changes: But How Badly?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7,202, November 8, 2010. For more on pre-election public opinion, see the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research study conducted on September 2-12, 2010. Available here: <http://www.iiseeps.org/data10-391.html>.

⁷ Rodger Potocki, "Belarus: A Tale of Two Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 22,3, July 2011.

Faces of Freedom Political Prisoners in Belarus



Mikalay Autukhovich

Unlike the other political prisoners, Mikalay Autukhovich was incarcerated prior to the December protest. This is his second imprisonment for political activities. A thrice-decorated military veteran, Autukhovich returned to his home town of Vaukavysk in 1991 and founded a volleyball tournament to commemorate the day when the Soviet army left Afghanistan. After launching a taxi company and becoming a well-known anti-corruption and civic entrepreneur, his cabs were confiscated by the police. He was subsequently convicted of tax evasion in 2005. In protest, Autukhovich went on a hunger strike, which lasted 63 days. After his release, he was again arrested in 2009, this time on trumped-up terrorism charges. Autukhovich was later sentenced to five years in prison for the possession of five shotgun shells and a hunting rifle. Since then, he has undertaken two hunger strikes lasting almost 100 days. His mother has asked him not to continue risking his health and life, declaring, "They need him dead but we need him alive." Despite being behind bars, Autukhovich continues to oppose the regime, collecting information on torture and other violations of prisoners' rights, which he publicizes via independent media outlets. In 2010, *Foreign Policy* listed him as one of 15 prominent political prisoners from around the world "who matter." That same year Autukhovich was awarded the Kastus Kalinowski medal by the Minsk NGO "Legacy."

Lukashenka.⁸ In the intervening months, the regime has maintained — and at times intensified — its crackdown on the opposition and moved to outlaw nearly all forms of public speech and peaceful assembly.⁹

NO “BUSINESS-AS-USUAL”

Following the onset of the crackdown, Western governments demonstrated an *esprit d’unité* with the people of Belarus. EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a rare joint statement, declaring that “the people of Belarus deserve better.”¹⁰ Foreign Affairs Ministers Carl Bildt, Karel Schwarzenberg, Radosław Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle stated firmly, “There can be no business-as-usual between the European Union and Belarus’ President.” These public affirmations of solidarity with the people of Belarus were followed by an outpouring of financial resources — when Western governments convened in Warsaw for the International Donor Conference “Solidarity with Belarus” in February, 2011, they pledged more than \$100 million in support of Belarusian pro-democracy and civil society organizations.

The onrush of goodwill and assistance pledges to Belarus’ embattled opposition was coupled with renewed Western pressure on the Lukashenka regime. The United States and the EU imposed travel bans on nearly 200 Belarusian officials and froze the financial assets they hold in the West. Washington has also imposed new — or otherwise reinstated — sanctions on Belarusian state-owned enterprises, including petrochemical companies Belneftekhim and Grodno Azot, tire maker Belshina,

⁸ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit*, 2011. Available here: <http://bit.ly/ouiJJC>.

⁹ A draft law introduced in July, 2011 is exceptionally expansive, prohibiting the “joint mass presence of citizens in a public place that has been chosen beforehand, including an outdoor space, and at a scheduled time for the purpose of a form of action or inaction that has been planned beforehand and is a form of public expression of the public or political sentiments or protest.”

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, Available here: <http://1.usa.gov/ikt6Vd>.

the fiber manufacturer Grodno Khimvolokno and the Naftan oil refinery.¹¹ For its part, the EU Council on Foreign Affairs announced in June that it would apply similar sanctions to the state-owned arms manufacturer BelTechExport, telecom provider BT Telecommunications and gambling company Sport-Pari, and that it would impose an embargo “on arms and on materials that might be used for internal oppression” inside Belarus. Additionally, the EU has limited the involvement of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in the country pending “a sufficiently positive assessment of the human rights and rule of law situation” and has redirected European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) funding away from state authorities and toward non-state and local actors.¹²

In addition to the new — and renewed — steps to isolate the regime from the top down, leaders in Europe and the United States have intensified their efforts to cultivate and strengthen grassroots pro-democracy organizations inside Belarus. For example, during his official visit to neighboring Poland in May, U.S. President Barack Obama publicly condemned Lukashenka’s crackdown and announced joint efforts with Warsaw to support Belarusian civil society through Poland’s newly founded International Solidarity Foundation, the expansion of the Kirkland and Kalinowski Scholarships for Belarusian students and content development for BelSat television broadcasts.

At the same time, the slow pace of distributing assistance funds has worked against the overall positive Western response to the crackdown and blunted the near-term impact of efforts to expand the administrative capacity of Belarusian civil society organizations. While these bottlenecks appear to be abating, increasing the speed of funding disbursement and implementation,

¹¹ Additional punitive measures have been levied against the energy company Belarusneft for violating the Iran Sanctions Act. See U.S. Department of State, “New Sanctions Against Belarus,” August 11, 2011.

¹² Official Journal of the European Union, “Council Decision 2011/357/CFSP of June 20, 2011, amending Decision 2010/639/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against certain officials of Belarus,” June 21, 2011.

especially for groups operating inside Belarus, should remain a top priority for policymakers.

STILL IN A SPIRAL

Even as the Lukashenka regime has sustained its repressive crackdown on the opposition, the government's financial footing has deteriorated rapidly throughout 2011. The ensuing economic spiral is significant, in part because it helps to distinguish the current wave of domestic opposition to the government from previous expressions of political unrest. Perhaps more importantly, the country's economic woes have undermined a core pillar of Lukashenka's political bargain with the electorate. In the past, the existing arrangement allowed the presidential administration to outwardly justify its control of the country's political economy by claiming to provide citizens with a basic level of economic stability and predictability. Since the beginning of this year, however, the unraveling of that social contract has accelerated, leaving the regime more vulnerable than ever.

BELARUS' ECONOMIC WOES HAVE UNDERMINED A CORE PILLAR OF LUKASHENKA'S POLITICAL BARGAIN WITH THE ELECTORATE.

The Economic Sphere

The origins of the current financial crisis in Belarus have been years in the making, the result of persistent economic neglect, mismanagement and delayed reforms. After taking office in 1994, Lukashenka steadfastly rejected the path of economic reform and privatization – a process that was pursued in neighboring countries. Instead, the President opted to construct an alternative system of “market socialism” in Belarus. As vestiges of the communist system receded into memory across Central and Eastern Europe, they remained firmly in place in Belarus. The Belarusian KGB retained its Soviet-era brand; and 70 percent of the economy remained firmly in state hands.

Much like the Soviet model upon which it was based, Lukashenka's economic system was

Faces of Freedom

Political Prisoners in Belarus



Ales Byalitski

Born to a Belarusian family in Russian Karelia, Ales Byalitski returned to Belarus with his parents in 1964. A scholar of Belarusian literature, Byalitski is a talented literary critic and essayist. In 1986, he founded one of Belarus' first NGOs, the “Tuteishyja” Association of Young Writers. He served as its chairman until 1989. Byalitski would later go on to found the Belarusian Popular Front – the country's first democratic movement. From 1991-95, he also served on the Minsk City Council. As a result of intensified state repression in 1996, he founded the “Viasna” Human Rights Center. Today Viasna is the country's largest and most effective human rights organization. Since 2003, however, Viasna has operated illegally due to regime efforts to close it down. Nevertheless, Viasna has helped thousands of Belarusians with legal assistance and serves as Belarus' largest election observation NGO. As a result of his work, Byaliatski has been arrested or detained more than 20 times. But he has also received numerous international awards for his efforts to advance human rights, including the Andrei Sakharov Prize, the Homo Homini Award, the Per Anger Prize and most recently the Freedom Award. In 2007, he was short-listed for the Nobel Peace Prize. On August 4, 2011, Byalitski was arrested and accused of evading taxes on funds that Viasna used to assist repressed Belarusians. Facing a sentence of seven years, his detention has sparked international condemnation. In a letter from prison, Byalitski has reflected that, “Life stops here for me in comparison with the previous year. But there's something positive, because I have a lot of time to think. I am not nervous and don't make big plans, realizing that everything in my life now depends not on me, but on external factors. In other words, I am floating down the river of life and am prepared for any circumstance.” On September 25, Byalitski will celebrate his 49th birthday in prison.

unsustainable over the long-term. It relied heavily on the largess of neighboring Russia for its survival. When Moscow started to systematically disassemble its elaborate system of trade and energy subsidies for Belarus in 2007, Lukashenka's statist project began to come undone.¹³ The global financial crisis delivered an additional blow to the economy and by the beginning of 2009, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had to provide Belarus with \$2.5 billion in emergency loans.¹⁴

THE ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT FINANCIAL CRISIS IN BELARUS HAVE BEEN YEARS IN THE MAKING, THE RESULT OF PERSISTENT ECONOMIC NEGLECT, MISMANAGEMENT AND DELAYED REFORMS.

Rather than using the IMF intervention as an opportunity to restructure the domestic economy through privatization and liberalization, the regime artificially stimulated GDP growth through loose macroeconomic policies. As the Belarusian economy hemorrhaged foreign currency, Minsk borrowed heavily from foreign commercial lenders.¹⁵ Finally, in the run-up to the December 2010 presidential vote, the Administration unilaterally raised public sector wages by 25 percent. It was a calculated effort to buy public support on the eve of the election. But it was also a windfall that state coffers and the economy could ill afford.

¹³ Leonid Zlotnikov, "The Foreign Exchange Crisis in Belarus: Causes and Effects," *Central Europe Digest*, August 1, 2011.

¹⁴ International Monetary Fund, "Staff Report for the 2011 Article IV Consultation and Proposal for Post-Program Monitoring," February 17, 2011. Available here: <http://bit.ly/ncUpoe>.

¹⁵ According to IMF projections, the country's significant financing gaps are unsustainable over the medium term, with gross external debt expected to reach 75 percent of GDP and public debt forecast to reach 29 percent of GDP in 2016. See: IMF Country Report No. 11/66, March 2011.

Throughout the first half of 2011, Belarus displayed the symptoms of an economy running dangerously in the red. Its foreign currency reserves dwindled to just \$3.5 billion; the current account deficit ballooned to 16 percent of GDP. After the Belarusian Central Bank was forced to devalue the currency in May, the value of the Belarusian ruble dramatically plunged. By late August, the official exchange rate had fallen by 70 percent against the dollar, and was far lower at the "unofficial" black market.¹⁶ Yet even this dramatic action was not enough to halt the economic spiral. In fact, the initial currency devaluation was just the beginning of the country's financial hardships. Store shelves soon went empty and real wages declined rapidly under the pressure of rising prices for basic consumer goods. By early September, prices had risen by nearly 50 percent (relative to their December 2010 levels); basic staples like meat were in short supply.

Eager to find a solution, the regime reached out to Russia for emergency assistance through the Eurasian Economic Community. Moscow responded by providing \$800 million to Minsk and promised an additional \$2 billion over the next three years. A significant condition for the release of Moscow's aid, however, was the requirement that the regime sell between \$7.5 and \$9 billion worth of state-owned assets to Russian interests. This would include Belarus' remaining 50 percent share of the energy company Beltransgaz, as well as other high-value companies in the fertilizer and light manufacturing sectors. If completed, these sales might address the regime's immediate currency needs. But they would also amplify Russia's already-significant economic influence in the country. For over a decade, Lukashenka had publicly claimed that his regime was charting an independent course for Belarus. Yet when faced with the consequences of his economic policies, the regime's near-term survival strategies have taken precedence over the official rhetoric of Belarusian independence.¹⁷

¹⁶ In the black market, the decline is closer to 200 percent.

¹⁷ On Belarus' shifting policy toward Russia see: Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents," *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006.

The Political Sphere

Amid the ongoing political crackdown, the regime has acted to silence and suppress all forms of public opposition to its rule. As noted earlier, leading figures in the opposition — including a number of the 2010 presidential candidates and key members of their staff — have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms or have fled the country. Meanwhile, independent journalists and other activists face daily harassment, arrests and persecution. In a recent high-profile case, for example, the government dropped closure suits against two independent newspapers for critical reporting, opting instead to apply economic pressure.¹⁸

WHEN FACED WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS ECONOMIC POLICIES, LUKASHENKA'S NEAR-TERM SURVIVAL STRATEGIES HAVE TAKEN PRECEDENCE OVER THE OFFICIAL RHETORIC OF BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENCE.

In addition to imposing restrictions on traditional media, the regime has also utilized a variety of online surveillance technologies and continues to limit Internet freedom through a retrograde electronic media law. It has restricted or blocked access to websites and social media platforms; introduced compulsory registration for web domains; launched denial of service attacks against civil society and opposition websites; and continues to collect personal data on all Internet users. Additional measures to restrict online activity have included spamming Internet discussion threads about the opposition; misusing or misleading hashtags; and creating fake Twitter accounts to undermine activists.

¹⁸ Statement by the chief editor of *Narodnaya Volya*, a former defendant in the case. *Naviny*, "Closure suit against *Narodnaya Volya* dropped," July 9, 2011. Available here: <http://bit.ly/ql6olt>.

Despite these obstacles, as well as a public warning from Lukashenka that the regime would "strike hard" against further signs of domestic political unrest, several thousand people turned out in Minsk and elsewhere during the summer of 2011 to express their growing dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. These protests were not without risk to the demonstrators. On July 6 alone, authorities arrested at least 400 people, including some 180 in the capital and 220 in other regional centers. In total, throughout June and July, security forces have arrested more than 2,000 participants in the demonstrations and more than 500 people have received sentences of 5 to 15 days.¹⁹

¹⁹ During the summer, protesters deployed new, peaceful approaches, including clapping and orchestrating cacophonies of cell phones — all set to ring, beep or play music in unison in public spaces. *New York Times*, "Sound of Post-Soviet Protest: Claps and Beeps," July 14, 2011.

SECTION II: CATALYZING POSITIVE DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

IMPROVED POLICY INPUTS

Recognizing that the current situation in Belarus is more fluid than at any other time over the last two decades, there is a heightened need for greater consensus and public clarity in the Western approach toward the country. While it is vital to temper optimism over the potential for change, and accept the unpredictable and dynamic nature of the political situation, the present circumstances are particularly conducive for Western action. As the regime's financial situation deteriorates, Lukashenka can no longer credibly assert that his government is able to provide economic stability or deliver on the understood social contract. Consequently, there is reason to believe that the current environment could finally produce the conditions for stimulating positive democratic change inside Belarus.

THERE IS A HEIGHTENED NEED FOR GREATER CONSENSUS AND PUBLIC CLARITY IN THE WESTERN APPROACH TOWARD BELARUS.

In order to provide a roadmap for the “next steps” in the Western policy approach to Belarus, in June 2011, CEPA and Freedom House launched the Belarus Working Group, a bipartisan gathering of leading scholars, analysts and experts tasked with identifying sustainable and impactful Western strategies for supporting Belarusian civil society and dealing with the Lukashenka regime. The purpose of this exercise was to focus on ways in which enhanced cooperation and coordination within the EU, as well as across the Atlantic, could help to address both the short-term goal of catalyzing democratic change in Belarus and the long-term objective of preparing for a post-Lukashenka transition.

Political Prisoners

When it comes to the next steps in the Western policy response, the most immediate concern for transatlantic officials should be securing the unconditional release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners (including presidential candidates, opposition members, journalists and other activists). Since the onset of the crackdown, the international community has publicly called upon the regime to release these individuals. In mid-August and early September, Lukashenka pardoned nearly a dozen prisoners who had been convicted for taking part in the December 2010 protest. Belarusian officials later dropped charges against two others. Nevertheless, numerous political prisoners remain, including presidential candidates.

News of the presidential pardons — as well as suggestions that more could be forthcoming — generated cautious discussions in the West. However, it is important to note that state authorities have not cleared these individuals of all charges and provided for their release only after receiving a formal request from the prisoners. While some of the imprisoned have steadfastly refused to ask for a pardon, the burden of a criminal conviction will have particularly lasting implications for incarcerated presidential candidates and opposition leaders. For example, during the 2010 election cycle, former presidential candidate Alyksandr Kazulin was prevented from running for a second time because he was never cleared of charges following his post-election imprisonment in 2006. By issuing pardons without repealing their convictions, the regime ensures that prominent political opponents are prevented from renewing their challenge at the ballot box.

Given these developments, what are the best ways in which Western governments and multilateral institutions can help to free the

political prisoners, especially in light of potential “roundtable discussions” between the opposition and the regime? For now, opposition leaders have indicated that any negotiations with Lukashenka’s government should be contingent upon the release of all political prisoners. Yet the conditions of that release merit careful consideration in Western policy circles.

**THE MOST IMMEDIATE CONCERN
FOR TRANSATLANTIC OFFICIALS
SHOULD BE SECURING THE
UNCONDITIONAL RELEASE AND
REHABILITATION OF ALL
POLITICAL PRISONERS.**

In the past, targeted economic sanctions have proven to be a successful policy for securing the release of political prisoners in Belarus. And by instituting a new round of sanctions, asset freezes, travel restrictions and an embargo on arms shipments, Western governments have taken a necessary step in the right direction. But more action is needed. Going forward, a top priority for policymakers in the West should be the continued support for, and legal assistance to, the political detainees and their families. These efforts should be complemented by the provision of medical aid and humanitarian assistance.

Other innovative steps to compel the unconditional release of political prisoners could include the suspension of the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championship in Minsk. In light of the Western response to the recent political crackdown, the international community would strike a stunningly discordant tone by rewarding the Belarusian regime with the status and recognition afforded to the host country of this premiere global sporting event. Economically, suspension of the hockey championship in Minsk would prevent the government from collecting desperately-needed hard currency from foreign tourists — funds which could be used to continue the suppression of human rights in Belarus. Such an action would also send a resounding message to Lukashenka on the

Faces of Freedom Political Prisoners in Belarus



Alyaksandr Klaskouski

The son of one of Belarus’ leading independent political analysts, Alyaksandr Klaskouski studied journalism and received a law degree from the Belarusian State University. From 1999 to 2005, he served with Minsk’s traffic police. Klaskouski was a unique officer, speaking and writing reports in Belarusian, reading independent newspapers and displaying a portrait of Yury Zakharka on the wall in his office. Zakharka was a former Minister of the Interior who was “disappeared” by the regime in 1999. A decorated officer, he eventually rose to the rank of lieutenant. In 2005, Klaskouski left the police because he did not want to participate in repressive actions against citizens. During the December 19 demonstrations, he wore his old uniform under his jacket and pleaded with security forces not to use violence against peaceful protesters. The photo of him (above) — standing between unarmed protesters and riot police with his head bleeding — became one of the iconic images of the crackdown. During his subsequent arrest at his apartment, Klaskouski was brutally beaten. He was later sentenced to five years in a maximum security prison for inciting unrest. His family has been evicted and his wife and three children — ages 11, 7 and 3 — are surviving on a welfare benefit of \$60 per month. Human rights defenders believe Klaskouski is being persecuted in order to intimidate other police officers who might be disillusioned by the regime’s crackdown. On September 26, Klaskouski will celebrate his 33rd birthday behind bars.

unacceptability of his dictatorial rule and stress the immediacy of releasing the political prisoners. Given the President's intense — and often public — passion for the sport, the loss of the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championship would demonstrate the international community's solidarity and resolve that positive democratic change must occur in Belarus. Support for this action has already gained political backing through legislation in the U.S. House and Senate as well as the European Parliament.²⁰ It is now up to the International Ice Hockey Federation, the governing body of the championship, to show that the highest ideals of multi-national athletic competitions cannot be blind to the plight of the imprisoned in Belarus.

Western Financial Bailouts

One of the key issues that has emerged as a result of the shortage of hard currency in Belarus is what role, if any, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) should play. At this point, financial assistance from the IMF and other IFIs would run counter to the shared U.S. and European goal of stimulating positive change in Belarus. Recognizing that the infusion of additional Western resources would only help to subsidize the Lukashenka regime, the EIB and EBRD have adjusted their policies and denied Minsk direct assistance. However, a similar change has not been expressly apparent at the IMF. When a delegation from the IMF traveled to Belarus in June, Fund officials indicated that they had "initiated discussions on a possible IMF program" for Belarus.²¹ This position is counterproductive and unfortunate, since it has allowed Lukashenka's government to sow the belief that Western help is on the way. Moreover, it has signaled to Belarus' embattled opposition groups that the regime's economic footing may be far stronger than its balance sheet might otherwise indicate.

In dealing with officials in Minsk, the IMF should join the EIB and EBRD and clearly indicate that any negotiations on new assistance packages cannot proceed as long as the regime is unwilling to

²⁰ Including H.R. 515, "The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011."

²¹ "Statement by the IMF Mission to the Republic of Belarus," Press Release No. 11/229, June 13, 2011.

undertake a comprehensive restructuring of the domestic economy and while political prisoners remain in jail. If the IMF is reluctant to issue such a statement, the United States, as the largest donor to the Fund, should do so. Currently, U.S. law requires Washington to use its voting weight within the IMF to "advance the cause of human rights."²² While the United States has taken a firm stance on the matter in the past, divisions remain among many EU Member States as to the best way forward. European leaders clearly have a genuine desire to see democratic reform take root in Belarus, but differ on the optimal strategy for bringing about that outcome. Some EU Member States have been reluctant to press institutions like the IMF too aggressively; still others are understandably concerned about the repercussions for their own economies should Belarus' financial system collapse entirely.

The result is an EU that is less united and effective than it might have otherwise been. Nevertheless, there is still the potential to forge a cohesive U.S. and European approach within the IMF. In a letter sent to U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner in August, six leading U.S. Senators reinforced this message by urging the Administration to galvanize the shared transatlantic goal of fostering democratic change in Belarus into a unified position against IMF bailouts.²³ Given the Lukashenka regime's failure to fully and comprehensively implement the economic reforms agreed to under the IMF's previous assistance package, the United States and EU voting members should coordinate their efforts to deny Belarus the current request for \$8 billion in Fund assistance. Simultaneously, members should also make clear their readiness to expedite IFI support for Belarus in the event that the domestic situation improves significantly.²⁴

²² United States Code, Title 22, Section 262.

²³ Ales Daschinski and Richard Solash, "Belarus Opposition Leaders Hail U.S. Senators' Tough Stance on Lukashenka," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 3, 2011.

²⁴ Specifically related to the status of political prisoners, the composition of the government and prospects for comprehensive economic reform.

Supporting Civil Society

The expansion of Belarusian civil society and pro-democracy groups' capabilities and administrative capacities has been another top priority for the international community. The post-crackdown pledge of \$100 million in Western support was an important sign of international solidarity. Despite the slow arrival of these funds, enhanced Western attention to Belarus and the fresh injection of financial support for civil society present a valuable opportunity to evaluate how and where resources are spent. Perhaps most importantly, it creates a chance to focus on whether the current funding allocation is the most conducive to achieving the short- and long-term transition goals for Belarus. In this context, a number of key questions have arisen since the onset of the regime's crackdown:

- How can the international community safely expedite the flow of assistance to groups that need it and expand current outreach to those within Belarus who may not have enjoyed access to such aid previously, especially if they are located outside of Minsk?
- How can donors demonstrate greater flexibility in adapting to rapidly changing needs on the ground, while simultaneously allowing time for the establishment of critical monitoring and evaluation mechanisms?
- What are the most effective types of grassroots capacity-building projects and how can Western agencies better utilize available resources?

In answering these questions, the funding priorities of Western development agencies (including USAID) should be better aligned to address the most pressing transatlantic objectives in Belarus. Typically, outside assistance has emphasized support for "soft," community-building or non-political civil society initiatives. Yet the soft approach does not appear to have rendered sufficient results. Moreover, since the onset of the crackdown, it has grown increasingly difficult to conduct even these soft programs in cooperation with state authorities. The recent decision by the

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Mikita Likhavid

Born in Minsk, Mikita Likhavid is a 21 year old activist of the "For Freedom" Movement and a part-time law student at the non-state Minsk Institute of Public Administration. After being detained on December 19, school administrators placed him on forced academic leave. Prior to the demonstration, Likhavid had been in Lithuania with his girlfriend. He returned for the election night rally because he "had to be there." Sentenced to three and a half years in a medium security prison, Likhavid does not recognize the verdict and refuses to cooperate with his captors. For this principled resistance, Likhavid has been placed in solitary confinement at least five times, totaling more than 55 days. After his own release, fellow political prisoner Andrey Pratasenia stated that Likhavid is viewed inside prison as "a real hero who never stops fighting the system." The "For Freedom" Movement has submitted more than 100 requests to hold protests in support of Likhavid. All have been denied. His mother, Alena Likhavid, is active in solidarity campaigns for political prisoners. She was detained and sentenced to ten days in prison for participating in the "silent protest" of July 20. Upon her release Alena Likhavid stated, "Now I have a metal rod inside me that can't be broken by anything. I did not allow myself to cry and kept telling myself that Mikita had gone through it all; and this meant that I could also do it with dignity."

Initiative for Social Action and Renewal in Eurasia (ISAR) to close its Minsk offices due to regime interference over environmental programs and the cancellation of a USAID-funded Belarusian MBA program — in conjunction with the Riga School of Business — are fresh examples of this emerging trend. As long as Lukashenka remains in power, Western funding preferences should be prioritized to target material support for civil and opposition groups — including political parties. While there is an increasing recognition of the need for such recalibration, consensus on implementation has not been forthcoming.

THE FUNDING PRIORITIES OF WESTERN DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES SHOULD BE BETTER ALIGNED TO ADDRESS THE MOST PRESSING TRANSATLANTIC OBJECTIVES IN BELARUS.

Leveraging Media

Additionally, the target and scope of Western assistance projects could be better coordinated between the EU and the United States. One area where enhanced coordination could yield positive results is with respect to Belarus' media. Support for independent media outlets in the country would serve to break the information blockade that Lukashenka's regime has imposed on the population. To this end, new media platforms should be a key element of Western engagement with Belarusian civil society. Currently, 3.8 million Belarusians (46 percent of the population) use the Internet; 73 percent of those use it on a daily basis; 46 percent have broadband access; and 33 percent of all users are in Minsk. The number of Internet users is also growing rapidly. From 2009 to 2010, Belarus' overall Internet audience expanded by almost 18 percent; and the growth in the number of users of news and information websites was 82 percent. In fact, by April 2011, the total daily audience of such websites had reached about

400,000 — equal to the audience size of a state TV channel.²⁵

As Belarusians increasingly look to the Internet for reliable news and information, a key challenge for independent media will be to utilize their funding resources to improve distribution capacity, expand social media outreach and increase their domestic audience. In the case of platforms like BelSat television programming, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, European Radio for Belarus and Voice of America broadcasts, these outlets could also be geared to more effectively leverage the soft power appeal of Western culture. By offering high-quality Western entertainment in tandem with accurate reporting, cross-border broadcasts would be better positioned to reach the widest possible audience within Belarus, while simultaneously showcasing the benefits of an open society.

Equally important, though often overlooked, is the need to bolster independent regional and local media outlets inside Belarus. Few of the Minsk-based websites, for example, feature local or regional news — content that is specific and relevant for audience members who live outside of the capital. Fewer still are the number of independent newspapers that are specifically published for non-Minsk readers. By expanding the reach of locally- and regionally-focused independent media outlets, Western efforts to break the regime's information blockade could be even more successful.

People-to-People

Developing people-to-people contacts is another potential channel for strengthening Western soft power influence among Belarusians. To this end, the U.S. Administration's commitment to help Poland expand the Kirkland and Kalinowski Scholarships is a good start. In order to widen the impact of person-to-person interactions, the EU has invited Belarus to begin negotiations on visa facilitation. Thus far, Minsk has declined to pursue discussions on this issue. Nevertheless, additional efforts to lower the barriers to travel within the EU for Belarusian citizens should be considered and

²⁵ "Internet in Belarus," May 2011. Available here: <http://bit.ly/pxHcNH>.

encouraged among all Member States. For their part, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have already signed agreements aimed at simplifying travel procedures for citizens who live within 30 miles of the border. Ratification and implementation of these arrangements should now be expedited.

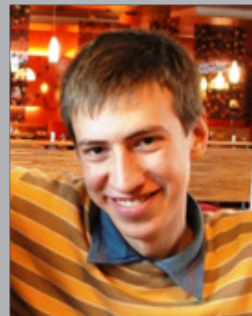
Engaging the Opposition

One of the enduring challenges to advancing democratic change in Belarus is the persistence of deep fractures in, and an underlying lack of unity among, the country's opposition groups and leaders. Additionally, the inability of these groups to present a comprehensive policy alternative to the country's economic woes has been a drag on their effectiveness in connecting with a wider section of the population. In advance of the December 2010 elections, as the EU attempted to engage with Lukashenka's regime and the United States withdrew its financial support, Belarusian opposition parties resorted to individual funding sources and eventually put forward multiple presidential candidates. Compared to past elections, this multi-candidate approach helped to increase the level of political dynamism in Belarus. Yet most of these candidates underperformed in their ability to resonate with voters — a critical component of any successful campaign.

ONE OF THE ENDURING CHALLENGES TO ADVANCING DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN BELARUS IS THE PERSISTENCE OF DEEP FRACTURES IN THE COUNTRY'S OPPOSITION GROUPS AND LEADERS.

Despite these obstacles, there are encouraging indications that the opposition is making some progress in resolving its differences. Opposition parties coordinated the collection of voter signatures for multiple candidates during the presidential campaign, refrained from unconstructive criticism of each other during

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Fyodar Mirzayanau

Fyodar Mirzayanau first became active in politics at age 11, helping to distribute leaflets in Niasvitz during the 2001 election campaign. A talented student, he achieved the highest score on the entrance exam to the prestigious Faculty of Management at the Belarusian State Economic University, where he specializes in the economics of cybernetics. He is an avid cyclist and admirer of the works of Lev Gumilyov, who spent almost 20 years in the Soviet Gulag. This young economist attended the December 19 protest to support another economist, presidential candidate Yaraslau Ramanchuk. Mirzayanau was arrested with his friend Illya Vasilevich, who was to become the youngest of the 2010 political prisoners. In May, Mirzayanau was sentenced to three years for taking part in the protest. Mirzayanau has refused to cooperate with either his jailers, who seek an admission of guilt, or his university administration, which has asked him to voluntarily withdraw. His mother has said that, "My son will get through this. He has stronger beliefs than those who try to break him."

debates and came together on election night demonstrations. Since the election, efforts to launch a Coordinating Council, which has met irregularly and brings together some of the opposition parties, have shown a recognition that greater cohesiveness is important. Meanwhile in June, members of the “6+ Group” (representing leading opposition forces in Belarus) signed a common declaration on cooperation and their mutual commitment to the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners as a necessary starting point for future negotiations with the regime. Mechanisms like the Coordinating Council and similar initiatives like the “6+ Group” should be encouraged by the West and utilized to greater effect as a means of engaging with the opposition.

Amid the diversity of Belarus’ multiple political parties and viewpoints, some groups are nevertheless more credible than others.²⁶ For Western policy-makers, the nature of the country’s disparate political opposition presents a two-fold challenge: first, in finding the right approach for engaging with these groups; and second, in helping the opposition to be in a position to run the country when change comes.

Despite their diverging political platforms, all opposition groups can work together toward *E pluribus unum*, cooperating in the shared goal of assuring the rapid transition to a democratic, open society in Belarus. While recognizing the West’s finite ability to unite these forces under a single platform, time and resources could nevertheless be invested in rallying opponents of the regime around the overriding vision of “democratic change.” An intensified focus on this common objective could also hold greater appeal to Belarusian voters, especially those who have not yet been energized by the various party platforms within the opposition.²⁷

²⁶ Questions have been raised regarding the legitimacy of certain parties and leaders; some are radical and seek to destabilize the country.

²⁷ For more on public views see: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, “Focus Group Report, Belarusian Public Opinion: the Political and Economic Situation Prior to and after the 2010 Presidential Elections.”

Building on a cohesive theme, Belarus’ political opposition could subsequently benefit by advancing a clear, alternative vision for the country, particularly one that is detailed enough to address the problems created by the economic crisis. Western engagement with the opposition should therefore seek to promote strategies for connecting with the population and cultivating an actionable alternative to the *status quo*. Once the immediate goal of catalyzing a democratic governmental transition is achieved, individual parties within the opposition will be able to pursue their own political platforms and policy priorities.

Identifying Agents of Change

At this critical moment in Belarus, it is essential to identify viable agents of change inside the country and pinpoint where bases of political support might be cultivated within disparate social, economic and age groups. In this regard, one of the most significant constituencies for change is the youth of Belarus. This demographic is the most pro-western, pro-democratic part of Belarusian society. Mobilizing the country’s youth should therefore be a top priority in helping the opposition to prepare for positions of responsibility in a post-Lukashenka Belarus.

WESTERN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE OPPOSITION SHOULD SEEK TO PROMOTE STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING WITH THE POPULATION AND CULTIVATING AN ACTIONABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE *STATUS QUO*.

However, even if political transformation in Belarus is fueled by popular frustration and demands, it is entirely possible that a change in the *status quo* could originate from within Lukashenka’s inner circles. For Western officials, the challenge here will be to prepare for such a scenario and determine the best methods for engaging with elite constituencies. Prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, for

example, the West established solid relationships and ties with the intelligence service, the military and other sections of the government. Activating these linkages during and after the Revolution proved to be exceptionally valuable for officials in the United States and Europe. Unfortunately, similar contacts in Belarus are not as robust, thereby creating a notable gap in the international community's ability to engage with these potential agents of change or to exert a positive influence on elites in the course of a post-Lukashenka transition.

In addition to figures inside the government, there is an equally important need to tap the cadre of the disaffected voices who were previously influential in the regime but have since been ousted. Likewise, Western governments should consider approaching Belarusian diplomatic missions in Washington and in Europe to encourage them to resign, as Ukrainian diplomats did in 2004 in protest over efforts to steal that election. A cascade of resignations among these individuals could create a momentum of its own, sending an important signal to colleagues in Minsk regarding the longevity and staying power of the current government.

Above all, the purpose of this strategy should be to encourage elite actors — current and former — to consider alternatives to Lukashenka and the *status quo*. Consequently, there is a need within the analytical, think-tank and policy community to identify the people, agencies and institutions where a transition would originate and to conceive of practical methods for effectively engaging with these particular agents of change.

PREPARING FOR A POST-LUKASHENKA BELARUS

As seen in Central Europe's post-communist experience, the downfall of an authoritarian regime often creates a short period of "extraordinary politics" in the domestic political environment. During this brief moment, post-revolutionarily governments have an opportunity to implement a systemic — and often difficult — transformation of society and state governance. Once this opening expires, however, the exceptionally favorable conditions for reform are nearly impossible to recreate. By preparing now, Western policymakers

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Paval Vinahradau

Born in Minsk, Paval Vinahradau graduated from a vocational school as a barber and a musical school as a pianist. Despite being only 23, Vinahradau is a long-time activist. As a member of the civic campaign "European Belarus," he was detained several times. In fact, he is now serving his third sentence. Vinahradau was first arrested in 2007 during a protest against cutbacks in social benefits. He was trying to free his girlfriend Svyatlana from the grasp of police forces. In 2008, he was sentenced to two years of restricted freedom for joining a demonstration of small entrepreneurs as part of the "Case of the 14" Movement. He was pardoned after serving one year. In 2010, he joined the "Tell the Truth" initiative of Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu and became a leader of his election campaign team. Arrested for taking part in the December 19 demonstration, Pavel was held with 23 people in a cell designed for 15. During his trial, he wore t-shirts with different political phrases and images as a silent protest against the miscarriage of justice. Sentenced to four years, he proposed to Svyatlana in a letter from prison and became the first of the political prisoners to be married behind bars. Due to his determination and refusal to admit his guilt in return for a pardon, Paval has been called "Vinahradau the Unbreakable."

could assist a post-Lukashenka government in making the most of this unique window of opportunity, ultimately impacting the country's reform trajectory.

In laying the groundwork for an eventual transition in Belarus, the overriding priority for Western officials should be to ensure that the country's political and economic reforms are complete and irreversible. Swift action and decisive policies will be required to prevent non-transparent practices and rent-seeking from solidifying. This will ultimately help to inoculate the domestic political culture against a return to old, authoritarian habits in governance.

THE OVERRIDING PRIORITY FOR WESTERN OFFICIALS SHOULD BE TO ENSURE THAT THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS ARE COMPLETE AND IRREVERSIBLE.

As part of the preparation process, Western policymakers should answer a number of critical questions, including:

- How will Western governments react to regime change and what approach will the EU and the United States take toward a post-Lukashenka government? Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic should anticipate the need for a coordinated Western response to a transition scenario and be ready to present it to opposition groups and agents of change prior to the event.
- What do Western officials want to see happen in Belarus during a post-Lukashenka transition period? An open, pluralist system that respects democratic norms would be more conducive to ensuring that the reforms remain permanent. To this end, the international community should make sure that subsequent elections (both

presidential and parliamentary) are free and fair. At that point, all opposition parties and candidates should be able to run for public office — if they wish. Doing so might also push the democratic opposition to engage in meaningful and healthy policy discussions.

- How should the economic transition of the country be managed? How can Western governments assist Belarus in its transformation from a statist to a free market system, and what economic incentives can be offered for doing so? With more than 70 percent of the economy still under state control, Belarus' transition would represent the largest privatization program since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Likely areas for immediate attention would include mitigating the burden of debt accumulated by the old regime and advising the next government on how to successfully leverage the initial phases of the transition to restructure the country's economy. In addition, the doors to the EIB, EBRD, IMF and World Bank could be reopened to help the country during this period.
- What lessons do the experiences of Central European countries in the 1990s hold for Belarus? How can the transition government undertake the difficult process of reform in a way that is transparent, rule-based and puts Belarus on a path to future economic prosperity? One likely risk for the post-Lukashenka government will be in allowing a partial, unfinished reform process to linger over several years. As seen in the post-communist example of neighboring Ukraine, such an outcome presents an unwanted drag on economic growth and allows for potential democratic backsliding. By helping Belarus complete the reform process quickly, Western policymakers will aid the country in retaining its national independence and avoid the prospect of rollback over the long-term.
- What can the international community offer now, as inducement to existing officials who may be open to the idea that regime change

is positive and helpful to the country's future? Ultimately, the goal of current U.S. and EU policy toward Belarus is to see the country assume its rightful place in the European community of democracies. Western officials should therefore amplify the message that visa bans, asset freezes and financial sanctions can be replaced by an outpouring of international assistance and political support should the country proceed down the path of democratic transition.

SECTION III: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The existence of an enduring dictatorship — one presiding over a self-inflicted economic catastrophe — on the EU’s border is contrary to transatlantic interests, values and the decades-long policy of Europe “whole, free and at peace.” The ideal Western policy approach to Belarus should not seek to merely tame Lukashenka, but should strive to conduct free and competitive elections, establish robust democratic governance, eliminate repressive state security measures, develop vibrant independent media and civil society, and strengthen transparency and the rule of law. Those around Lukashenka need to know that a brighter future lies ahead after he is gone, but they also need to understand that replacing one dictator with another is not the solution.

In order to catalyze positive democratic change in Belarus (Track I) and lay the groundwork for the time when the country is able to take its rightful position as a democratic European nation (Track II), we offer the following recommendations.

TRACK I: CATALYZING POSITIVE DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

In the Economic Sphere:

- **Privatization**

Not all sales should be final (or perceived as such). Should Lukashenka attempt to extend his rule by selling off the country’s valuable economic assets, he would weaken Belarus’ independence and stability. This is especially true if the sale of state-owned enterprises is concluded below their fair market value. Belarusian opposition groups and civic leaders should call into question the validity of these potential sales in advance and commit to reviewing them under a post-Lukashenka government — with the prospect of invalidating the asset transfers.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid. 1

- **Economic Sanctions**

Intensify pressure on the regime through economic sanctions. The international community should continue its efforts to eliminate revenue channels that support the current government by sealing off access to funds in offshore accounts. In addition to the current list of individuals and companies under visa bans, asset freezes and sanctions, the United States and the EU could help by imposing economic sanctions against other enterprises as well, further reducing their attractiveness and value to prospective buyers like Russia. More robust sanctions could include businesses linked to the regime, such as the state arms manufacturer BelTechExport (in the case of the United States), the potash company Belaruskali, pipeline operator Beltransgaz, mobile phone company MTS Belarus, the Minsk Automotive Company and the Mozyr Oil Refinery.

- **Assistance from the IMF**

Shape perceptions on financial bailouts. With the economy in freefall, Lukashenka is pinning his hopes on a Western financial bailout and is certainly suggesting such a deal is in the offing — even if, in reality, it is not. The United States and EU Members should state clearly and publicly their opposition to any assistance from international financial institutions, such as the IMF, without the unconditional release of all political prisoners. Since an IMF bailout at this point could have the unintended consequence of extending the lifespan of Lukashenka’s rule, the international community should send a strong message to both the opposition and members of the regime: Western help is not coming to save the current government.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid. 2

In the Political Sphere:

- **Political Prisoners**

Secure the release of all political prisoners. In response to the ongoing crackdown, both the United States and the EU have demonstrated strong leadership in calling for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. Securing their freedom, as well as expanding channels to assist in the legal defense of detainees and expedite support for their families, should be an immediate priority for the international community.

- **The Democratic Opposition**

Extend direct support to Belarus' pro-democratic groups. Western policymakers should continue their efforts to open the political space and support Belarus' pro-democratic groups, civil society and independent journalists. The United States and EU Members have already pledged more than \$100 million in financial, technical and commodities assistance. We recommend that Western governments now expedite the flow of these resources to Belarus' civil society groups as well as to political parties in the democratic opposition inside the country.

- **Civil Society Organizations**

Galvanize the links between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the population. Currently these linkages are very weak, a result of the relentless — and to some degree successful — efforts by the regime to undermine civil society in Belarus. Simultaneously, it is necessary to broaden and align the work of CSOs with the needs of the population. Notwithstanding the inherent security risks for individuals who work with CSOs — concerns that can diminish broad-based civic participation — such groups should focus their efforts on connecting with the population. By doing so, CSOs would be in a position to close the gap with segments of society that have remained on the sidelines. If successful, this approach would ultimately strengthen and expand the platform for civic activism in Belarus.

- **Targeting Western Assistance**

Look for opportunities to share best practices and effective techniques among the recipients of Western assistance. Following the political crackdown, financial aid from the EU's EaP is being retooled to domestic civil society groups. Likewise, European officials are now actively engaging with the recipients of this assistance to insure that it is tailored for on-the-ground needs. Since 2006, a group of more than 50 donors and practitioners have come together through the Belarusian International Implementers Meeting (BIIM) to coordinate and improve funding allocations. Taken together with other venues, such as the Vilnius Roundtable Format, these mechanisms are vital for ensuring that the right type of aid reaches the right people and organizations.

- **Breaking the Information Blockade**

Media outreach and surrogate broadcasting through platforms such as BelSat television, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, European Radio for Belarus, Voice of America, as well as other online/social media initiatives, are helping to break the regime's information blockade. While the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011 — now under consideration by the U.S. Senate — correctly emphasizes the important role these programs play, Western policymakers should seek to expand the appeal and reach of surrogate broadcasts inside the country, including dissemination in all languages that Belarusians speak.

TRACK II: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A POST-LUKASHENKA BELARUS

In the Economic Sphere:

- **Plan Now, Move Quickly**

Western governments and institutions should prepare now for transition in Belarus. In order to help a post-Lukashenka government during the early phases of economic transition, Western governments and financial institutions should prepare their response strategies now, so as to provide rapid and comprehensive assistance to Belarusian officials. This includes setting out what the international community is prepared to offer a

post-Lukashenka Belarus as a further incentive to affect change from within the current regime.

- **Apply Lessons from Central Europe**

Post-Lukashenka Belarus should draw on Central Europe’s experience. Based on similar transitions in the region, Belarus will likely face a number of well-known challenges as it begins the long-delayed process of economic reform. The most pressing of these potential obstacles will be the need to stabilize foreign trade and macroeconomic imbalances, prevent the onset of hyper-inflation, fully liberalize domestic supply chains and disassemble large state monopolies. In addressing these and other obstacles, Central Europe’s think-tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be in a unique position to help. Many have already distinguished themselves as some of the most experienced and active European organizations working in Belarus. Going forward, these organizations could serve as a vast reservoir of regional expertise regarding best practices and lessons learned in the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

- **Create Opportunities for Entrepreneurs**

A key element of any economic transition will be to spur investment in small- and medium-sized enterprises. Over the past decade, models such as the Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF), the Polish-American Enterprise Fund, the Baltic-American Enterprise Fund and the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund have been successful in stimulating economic opportunity and growth in nations of the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. Similar funds have been contemplated in the wake of democratic transitions in the Middle East. To date, however, Belarus has not received funding from the WNISEF. In a post-Lukashenka environment, policymakers could establish a new enterprise fund for Belarus. Since past successful funds have provided an exceptional return on a modest investment of public dollars, a future enterprise fund for Belarus could replicate this model. Led by experienced private sector board members, such a fund could also be structured to repay the U.S. Treasury after a reinvestment cycle. Finally, the possibility of creating a non-profit legacy

foundation, one supported through capital from the original WNISEF investment, could also be explored in the near-term. Although not currently in place, such a project could serve as a platform for providing high-quality business education and foster entrepreneurship through targeted people-to-people exchanges.

In the Political Sphere:

- **Focus on Sustained Democratization**

Elections and democratic institutions should develop in tandem. Belarus’ potential transformation from “Europe’s last dictatorship” to “Europe’s newest democracy” will require more than just internationally recognized elections. It will also necessitate the elimination of repressive state security measures; the establishment of robust protection mechanisms for independent media and civil society; and allow respect for the rule of law and a culture of transparency and openness to take root in government. In a post-Lukashenka environment, the aim of Western policymakers should be to help the Belarusian people retain their independence while avoiding the potential for democratic backsliding over the long-term.

- **Make the Case for Values *and* Strategic Interests**

Western policymakers, particularly in the United States, should frame the outcome of a transition in Belarus in terms of values and long-term strategic interests. Thus far, ample — and necessary — attention has been directed at improving the human rights situation in Belarus. At the same time, relatively little work has been devoted to articulating the country’s geostrategic importance to Europe and the United States. A pro-Western, democratic, free market Belarus would place considerably less strain on the stability and security outlook of key NATO allies in the region. In preparing the groundwork for a post-Lukashenka Belarus, the Western policy community should elevate Belarus’ strategic importance for the EU and the United States, alongside values-based priorities like democratization.

- **Mentor Future Leaders**

Engage tomorrow's leaders among today's opposition. Members of the current Belarusian political opposition and leaders of civil society groups will likely fill the ranks of a future Belarusian government (should Lukashenka flee the country or be removed from power). In anticipation of that day, current assistance programs aimed at bolstering the capacity of Belarus' embattled opposition should also look to identify future Belarusian leaders and increase Western contacts through career mentoring and exchange programs. The experiences and professional relationships developed through these exchanges could one day play a vital role in helping a cadre of young Belarusian leaders guide their country toward a prosperous, democratic future.

- **People-to-People Exchanges**

At the grass-roots level, people-to-people exchanges should remain a core pillar of Western engagement. These efforts should include steps to streamline access to visas for Belarusian citizens as well as sustained support for educational initiatives offered through the European Humanities University and the Kirkland and Kalinowski Scholarships. While the latter provides opportunities for Belarusians to study in Poland, similar programs also exist to facilitate foreign study in Estonia, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. In the case of the United States, the Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship provides educational exchange opportunities for graduate-level students in Belarus. However, the highly-successful Fulbright Program does not currently offer similar avenues for Belarusian undergraduates. This represents a notable gap in U.S.-based people-to-people outreach, one which policymakers in Washington should seek to close. Other avenues for U.S.-based people-to-people exchanges could focus on targeted programs for higher education institutions specializing in Belarus, including for example, the Center for Belarusian Studies at the Southwestern College in Kansas.

SECTION IV: POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS

Alyaksandr Atroschenkau – sentenced to 4 years in prison

Mikalay Autukhovich – sentenced to 5 years in prison

Zmitser Bandarenka – sentenced to 2 years in prison

Zmitser Bulanau – sentenced to 3 years in prison

Zmitser Dashkevich – sentenced to 2 years in prison

Aleh Fedarkevich – sentenced to 3.5 years in prison

Alyaksandr Klaskouski – sentenced to 5 years in prison

Mikita Likhavid – sentenced to 3.5 years in prison

Uladzimir Loban – sentenced to 3 years in prison

Eduard Lobau – sentenced to 4 years in prison

Alyaksandr Malchanau – sentenced to 3 years in prison

Fyodar Mirzayanau – sentenced to 3 years in prison

Zmitser Novik – sentenced to 3.5 years in prison

Andrey Paznyak – sentenced to 2 years of restriction of freedom

Andrey Sannikau – sentenced to 5 years in prison, **2010 presidential candidate**

Paval Severinets – sentenced to 2 years of restriction of freedom

Mikalay Statkevich – sentenced to 6 years in prison, **2010 presidential candidate**

Ilya Vasilevich – sentenced to 3 years in prison

Paval Vinahradau – sentenced to 4 years in prison

Zmitser Vus – sentenced to 5.5 years in prison, **2010 presidential candidate**

Released on Pardon or Suspended Sentence

Andrey Dmitryeu – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence

Dimitry Drozd – sentenced to 3.5 years, released on pardon

Aliaksandr Fyaduta – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence

Aleh Hnedchyk – sentenced to 3.5 years in prison, released on pardon

Artsyom Hrybkow – sentenced to 4 years, released on pardon

Syarhey Kazakow – sentenced to 3 years, released on pardon

Irina Khalip – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence

Uladzimir Khamichenka – released on pardon

Ales Kirkevich – sentenced to 4 years, released on pardon

Alyaksandr Kvyatkevich – sentenced to 3.5 years, released on pardon

Syarhey Martseleu – sentenced to 2 years on probation

Vital Matsukevich – sentenced to 3.5 years, released on pardon

Zmitser Medvedz – sentenced to 3 years of restricted of freedom

Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence, **2010 presidential candidate**

Nasta Palazhanka – sentenced to 1 year of suspended sentence

Vasil Parfyankow – released on pardon

Andrey Pazhobut – sentenced to 3 years of suspended sentence

Andrey Pratsasenya – sentenced to 3 years, released on pardon

Vital Rymasheuski – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence, **2010 presidential candidate**

Yawhen Sakret – sentenced to 3 years, released on pardon

Syarhey Vaznyak – sentenced to 2 years of suspended sentence

Uladzimir Yaromenak – released on pardon

Currently Accused

Sviataslau Baranovich (in custody)

Ales Byalitski (in custody)

Ales Mihalevich, **2010 presidential candidate**

For further information about Belarus' political prisoners, visit:

<http://www.freebelarusnow.org/en/pp-gallery>

<http://salidarnasc.org/en/repressed>

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Center for European Policy Analysis

1225 19th Street, NW, Suite 450

Washington, DC 20036

Tel: (202) 551-9200

E-mail: info@cepa.org

www.cepa.org

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