

11

In Belarus, the leopard flaunts his spots¹

Even before the polls closed in Belarus's presidential election on 19 December, supporters of opposition candidates were planning their protests. Although the conduct of the campaign was remarkably liberal by recent standards, opponents of Alexander Lukashenka's regime confidently expected another rorted result, so no one was surprised when, late on polling day, the president claimed an implausibly huge victory. His return to authoritarian form was dramatically displayed when the government's security forces beat up protesters rallying in the centre of the national capital, Minsk. At least 640 people were arrested, including seven of the nine opposition candidates.

The leading opposition candidate, Vladimir Neklyayev, was seized and bashed on his way to the demonstration, suffering severe concussion. He was taken to hospital, where a group of plain-clothes thugs burst into the ward, dragging him off to jail. Neklyayev, who has serious vascular problems, has been denied treatment and there are fears for his life. Another leading opposition candidate, Andrei Sannikov, also injured, was stopped by traffic police and pulled out of a car on his way to hospital. His wife tried to hold on to him, for which she was also assaulted. Beatings in jail are reported to be widespread, and some protesters have been forced to recant, Iranian-style, on television.

1 First published in *Inside Story*, 4 Jan. 2011, insidestory.org.au/in-belarus-the-leopard-flaunts-his-spots.

Just over a week later, in Moscow, came the conviction of Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and a fellow Yukos Oil executive for allegedly stealing and laundering the proceeds of most of the oil produced by their own company. A few days earlier, well before the verdict, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met a handpicked audience to respond to pre-approved questions. Asked about Khodorkovsky, he said that 'a thief should stay in prison', putting paid to any idea that calls by President Dmitry Medvedev and his entourage for respect for the rule of law would be heeded. Khodorkovsky's real offence before his first show trial in 2003 had been to try to play a role in politics and even contemplate standing for the presidency against Putin. He has now been convicted a second time, in effect, for that same offence.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, the regime of President Viktor Yanukovich, who narrowly defeated the former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, in the presidential elections in early 2010, has recently charged his rival with various criminal offences, warning her that she may not leave the country. On 26 December one of her former ministers, Yuriy Lutsenko, was arrested while walking his dog, taken to jail and charged with embezzlement. Lutsenko, an anti-corruption campaigner of long standing, was the latest in a long list of former Orange Government ministers and senior officials jailed or indicted for such offences.

The contrast with the way the Orange leadership treated Yanukovich and his allies, who blatantly rorted the presidential election in 2004 then lost on the re-run forced by the Orange Revolution, couldn't be greater. The Orange President, Viktor Yushchenko, even appointed Yanukovich to the prime ministership for a time. Yanukovich and his Party of Regions were able to regroup and successfully contest the 2010 presidential elections, which were widely accepted by international observers as free and fair. But, since his election, Yanukovich has not reciprocated that generous treatment, having systematically abused the Ukrainian constitution to set up a centralised autocracy while persecuting his former opponents through a corrupted court system.

In other words, the authorities in each of the Slav-dominated former republics of the Soviet Union – Russia, Belarus and Ukraine – are displaying overt contempt for democratic norms. The curious thing is that they are doing this precisely at the time when each of them is seeking closer relations with the European Union. In Russia's case, the

declared motivation is to pursue a 'partnership for modernisation'. In Ukraine's case it is a pitch for trade concessions and visa-free travel, but ostensibly with an ultimate aspiration to join the European Union. For Belarus, the 'last true dictatorship of Europe' as Condoleezza Rice once said, it has been a flirtation with Brussels to hedge against growing pressure from Moscow.

For Brussels, the primary motivation is to use 'engagement' to improve relations with each of these three difficult neighbours, encouraging transparency, good governance, financial probity and democratic norms. With Ukraine and Belarus there is the additional objective of succouring their independence against attempts by Moscow to resubordinate its smaller Slavic neighbours in some kind of Russian-led quasi-federation or close alliance.

After years of frustration in pursuing this objective, Moscow has latterly been making progress. Yanukovich's victory last February more than restored the close relations between Russia and Ukraine that existed before the Orange Revolution of 2004. Political, security, ethno-linguistic and economic ties have all been greatly strengthened. When Putin began to press forcefully for a takeover of the commanding heights of the Ukrainian economy, Yanukovich's key Ukrainian oligarch supporters felt their vital interests were threatened, and Kyiv's resistance stiffened. But the two governments remain very much closer than they were a year ago.

As with the Ukrainian presidential elections, Moscow looks to be the biggest winner from the recent spectacle in Belarus, which suggests that the friction between the two countries has begun to lift. And, in the last year or two, there have been encouraging developments for Moscow elsewhere in the 'near abroad', notably in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In various ways, Russia is bringing some of its wayward former provinces back home.

But Belarus has never been regarded as one of the more wayward former republics. So how did the recent conflict between Lukashenka and Moscow come about?

Despite a brief flowering of national independence on either side of the fall of communism, Belarus once again became virtually a Russian province in the years after Lukashenka won the presidency in 1994. He set about creating a neo-Soviet autocracy at the same time that the

Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, was starting to retreat from his earlier westward tilt. The neo-Soviet trends in the two countries strengthened after Putin came to power in 2000. For a time, it even seemed likely that the 'union-state' of Russia and Belarus, proclaimed in 2000, might become a reality.

But in recent years, as Russia reduced its energy subsidies to Belarus, as for other former republics, while pushing to secure control of their key economic assets, Lukashenka became anxious. He might have gone along with a Russo-Belarus confederation, but only if it guaranteed a prominent role – perhaps even the presidency – for him. As Russia's intentions and Putin's distaste for him became more evident, however, he began to seek and welcome EU overtures.

Under courtship but also pressure from Brussels, Lukashenka looked to improve his image and the country's foreign investment climate, which now sits well above that of Russia or Ukraine on international rankings. More surprisingly, he eased his notoriously repressive regime, presenting himself almost as a born-again liberal reformer and allowing opposition politicians to gain official acceptance as presidential candidates for the December 2010 poll. In early November 2010, the German and Polish foreign ministers promised Lukashenka support for a large International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led loan package on behalf of the European Union, as well as progress towards free trade and visa-free entry for Belarusians if he agreed to democratise his country.

Relations with the United States also improved for Belarus. In pursuing its 'reset' policy with Russia, the Obama administration has placed less emphasis than its predecessor on promoting democracy in the former republics of the Soviet Union, though it continues to welcome any moves in that direction. For his part, like Yanukovych earlier in 2010, Lukashenka has courted American approval by offering to eliminate his stocks of highly enriched uranium, a key priority for President Barack Obama. He was still sending out some positive messages to the United States in meetings with visitors from Washington think tanks just a few days before the crackdown.

While this opening towards the West was taking place in the months before the elections, Russia was increasing its pressure on Belarus. Moscow was angered by Lukashenka's efforts to resist increases in

energy prices and even more by his failure to support key Russian projects. In particular, Lukashenka was reluctant to adhere to the latest stage of Putin's Eurasian Custom Union integration project, into which Moscow was keen to inveigle other former republics, especially the fraternal Slav states of Belarus and Ukraine. Nor would he recognise the 'independence' of breakaway territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia, after Russian forces 'liberated' them during its 2008 war against Georgia. When Russia applied its usual tactic of manipulating energy trade to enforce compliance – suddenly and sharply reducing gas deliveries to Belarus in June 2010, for instance – Lukashenka responded by seeking further credits and subsidised energy elsewhere, including from China, Venezuela and Iran.

Responding in July 2010, state-controlled Russian television ran a series of denunciatory documentary programs about Lukashenka, depicting him as an autocrat with a contempt for human rights, referring to the violent deaths and disappearances among his opponents, and highlighting a comment he had allegedly made in praise of Hitler. Much of the material was not far off the mark, though it was also eerily applicable to Putin's Russia.

But, with the violent crackdown on 19 December, both the pro-Western and anti-Moscow trends in Belarus policy seemed to have been abruptly reversed. The leopard's familiar spots were again fully in evidence. Having blitzkrieged the domestic opposition that he had tolerated for months, Lukashenka belligerently dismissed Western concerns, saying he would put an end to 'senseless democracy'. The president's swashbuckling, bullyboy style, which was evident at a news conference after the violence, recalled Putin at his most colourful. It also recalled Lukashenka himself after the previous presidential elections, when he'd threatened to wring oppositionists' necks 'as one would a duck'.

Such language and behaviour are typical for Lukashenka. It has been reported that when the openly gay German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and his Polish counterpart Radosław Sikorski were visiting Minsk in November to offer aid in return for democratisation, they enquired about Belarus's treatment of sexual minorities. 'We don't have people like that here,' the President allegedly responded, 'but if we did, we'd put them in cattle wagons and ship them off to camps.'

Nonetheless, despite his well-known track record, both the brutality of the crackdown and the aggressive rhetoric seemed deliberately intended to alienate his erstwhile Western interlocutors.

What brought about the change? Essentially, it was the sustained Russian pressure. While he remained defiant in response to Moscow's campaign against him during the course of the year, Lukashenka was keenly aware that Belarus's economy depends heavily on Russia, with which about half of its foreign trade is still conducted, including some 70 per cent of its machinery exports and 90 per cent of its exports of food products. In particular, Belarus's relatively steady growth under Lukashenka has owed a great deal to the continued inflow of heavily subsidised Russian oil and gas. Even with that support, the economy was heading for trouble under the stress of the global financial crisis. Belarus has a serious and dramatically worsening balance of payments deficit, by one estimate likely to reach US\$7 billion for 2010. This has led, in turn, to a sharp increase in its foreign indebtedness. Belarus's debt repayment obligations are set to worsen in the next few years, threatening an uncontrollable spiral.

Lukashenka probably always knew that Moscow could ultimately draw the noose as tight as it chose, until finally he would be left with little recourse. The European Union was offering him less, and with the price tag of a democratisation agenda that might ultimately have cost him power. By contrast, Russia was 'only' seeking to reduce his country's national sovereignty and might well accept his continued grip on power if he were more cooperative. In similar circumstances earlier in the year – facing growing energy bills and debts to Russia as the financial crisis bit deeper – Ukraine's Yanukovich opted to reach a deal to extend Russia's lease on its Crimean naval facilities to 2042 in exchange for a reduction in the price of gas imports. Lukashenka has apparently now made a similar choice.

At the height of Moscow's anti-Lukashenka campaign, some observers speculated that Russia was seeking regime change in Minsk, but it was probably always more likely that Russia would be happy to reach a compromise on energy if Belarus toed the line on its neo-imperial agenda. On 9 December, 10 days before the election, Lukashenka met with the Russian leadership in Moscow and agreed to enter the Common Economic Space with Russia and Kazakhstan. At the same time he reached an agreement for an effective reduction in the price of

imported Russian oil that will save Belarus an estimated US\$4 billion a year, more than the one-off IMF credit that the EU emissaries had been talking about.

By election day, with the bilateral deal with Moscow more or less settled, Lukashenka no doubt felt that he could afford to treat his domestic opponents and the West with contempt. For its part, though it was mildly irritated by the fact that some Russian journalists had been caught up in the wave of detentions and weren't immediately released, Moscow was quick to express its satisfaction with the conduct of the election.

While there is no mystery behind the reasons for Lukashenka's volte-face, it is curious that he struck out against his opponents with such venom, even though this was bound to damage his relations with his Western interlocutors. It may be that he was responding to the fact that the elections went rather worse for him than he was prepared to acknowledge. Independent polling in the relatively free atmosphere before the ballot showed his support slipping and suggested that, in a fair fight, he might only get somewhere between 30 and 50 per cent of the vote, and would need to go to a second round to win.

Applying his usual tactics – stacking the voting booths with trustees (excluding all but a few token opposition representatives), abusing the bizarre system of 'preliminary voting' by people employed in government institutions who are ferried en masse to cast early votes, and common-or-garden ballot-stuffing – would probably have given him a comfortable victory anyway. But he could well have faced the embarrassment of the solid opposition support becoming visible and contrasting sharply with his sweeping majorities on previous occasions. The Polish Foreign Minister, Sikorski, has suggested this as an explanation for the fury of his attack on the protesters, citing information that he had attracted no more than 40 per cent of the vote rather than the nearly 80 per cent officially claimed.²

But thuggery is Lukashenka's style and always has been. He is a deeply Soviet figure, even more devoted to the less edifying aspects of the Soviet tradition than is Putin himself, who tends to view him as

2 See 'Belarus Elections in the Focus of Polish Press', *Belarus Digest*, 29 Dec. 2010, belarusdigest.com/2010/12/29/belarus-elections-in-the-focus-of-polish-press.

a naïve provincial bumpkin. So perhaps his response reflected, above all, exuberant relief that the pretence of a mini-democracy could be flung aside once concessions had been wrung from Moscow, and that smarming up to the West was no longer necessary. After the people power revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, all post-Soviet autocrats, including Putin, feel a slightly irrational fear that despite their popularity (in some cases) and their elaborate security/propaganda empires (in all cases) they could suddenly be pitchforked out of office by an angry mob. They see such events not as largely spontaneous domestic revolts but as sinister plots orchestrated in the West.

This mindset may help explain Lukashenka's violent reaction and anti-Western rhetoric, but there is also evidence that the crackdown was carefully choreographed. Provocateurs reportedly encouraged protesters to ignore their leaders' calls for restraint, and broke windows in government buildings to provide the pretext for the crackdown. This line of interpretation sometimes goes further, arguing that from the beginning Lukashenka's contacts with the West were an elaborate feint meant to extract a better deal from Russia, which, once it was in his pocket, meant that 'stupid democracy' and his tiresome opponents could at last be dispensed with.

Whatever his thinking or instincts in discarding the Western card, Lukashenka may have done himself a mischief. Moscow can, if it so desires, retract its concessions or find other ways of pressuring him whenever it likes. Lukashenka might be calculating, probably correctly, that Western governments will eventually swallow their pride and lift any sanctions against him, allowing him to resume tactical manoeuvres on both the eastern and western fronts. But in the meantime, he may need to reach an accommodation with Moscow, without the benefit of other options.

He could probably live with that. He detests democracy and impertinent challenges to his autocratic supremacy. In a close embrace with Putin's Russia, he can be sure of one thing: that he will be under no pressure to introduce democratic reforms. And for Moscow, a stable 'power vertical' (Putin's term for concentrated top-down power) in Belarus to match Russia's own would not cause any great distress, except in some liberal circles that still cleave to the fading hope of a Medvedev-led perestroika.

The two regimes will continue to have their differences. But for the time being they will be reconciled, and Moscow will feel it is making progress towards Putin's objective of at least partially repairing what he regards as 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century', the break-up of the Soviet Union. Putin will also be pleased that there are no longer any democratic experiments in Ukraine and Belarus that might conceivably turn the heads of his own constituents.

After a period of perhaps one or two years of indignation, and some sort of sanctions against Belarus, many or most Western countries will probably conclude that sanctions are only isolating Lukashenka unproductively, and will again look for ways of engaging the dictator. And, having made his point, Lukashenka may well again display interest in any fresh inducements. Western policy does not seem to have many viable alternatives in these situations. Despite Russia's seizure of parts of Georgia in 2008, its contemptuous dismissal of Western objections, its breach of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's ceasefire agreement and so on, within a few months the reset button had been pressed in Washington, and the European Union and NATO were both offering their own peace overtures to Moscow.

The main drivers of the current conciliatory trend in Western policy are the United States and Germany. For the Obama administration, the new policies relate not so much to Russia or Europe as to other concerns, especially nuclear disarmament, Iran and Afghanistan. WikiLeaks revelations have confirmed that official Washington has no illusions about Moscow, but Obama is still eager to establish the best possible bilateral relationship to advance other priorities.

Germany's conciliatory policy towards Russia has a long history, but the main factors at the moment are probably its huge and profitable economic relationship with Russia (including an element of energy dependency); Germany's memory of its *Ostpolitik* towards the Soviet Union in the 1970s, which it feels led to *détente*, perestroika and German reunification; fear of provoking Russia by adopting too forceful a policy in relation to former Soviet and Soviet-bloc territories; and, probably, an element of historic guilt for the barbarous Nazi occupation of Soviet lands during World War II. Berlin still feels grateful for reunification, in particular, and believes that other Western countries pushed Moscow too far after Mikhail Gorbachev had conceded so much. Germany is the main conciliator, but there are

others, notably France under former president Jacques Chirac, and increasingly also under Sarkozy, Italy under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Spain and Greece.

Between them, the United States, Germany and France have done much to pursue engagement with Russia. At the Lisbon summit of NATO on 19 and 20 November 2010, to which Medvedev was invited as an honoured guest, the rhetoric of both sides was extremely positive, despite the important differences that continue to divide them. Before the Lisbon summit there was a high-level meeting on 18 October involving Germany, France and Russia – but not the United States – at Deauville in France, at which security issues were discussed in a positive atmosphere. France has now confirmed it will sell Mistral-class amphibious assault vessels to Russia, despite the objections of Baltic NATO member states and the desperate would-be member Georgia. Paris has justified this unprecedented sale with the surprising reasoning that if NATO wishes to engage Russia on security and other issues it should be prepared to display trust towards it.

Given these determinedly positive atmospherics, it would be surprising if the developments in Belarus were to derail East–West *rapprochement* for long. Yet, for all the talk of engagement, modernisation, renewed security architecture and so on, the current situation is rather different from the *détente* of the 1980s. In Gorbachev, the West had a leader with whom it could indeed do business, a leader seeking to meet Western expectations at least halfway and to achieve domestic reforms that would make the Soviet Union a more democratic, transparent and normal society.

In Putin they have someone who bitterly regrets most of what happened under Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, and who is heading to a large extent in an anti-Western, even xenophobic direction – certainly domestically, and usually externally as well. Medvedev represents a different strain of thought within the elite, but though it might suit the Putin leadership that Medvedev presents a smiling face to the world, he seems unable to make his writ run on virtually any important issues.

The easy passage of New START through the US Senate will give the overall East–West dynamic some momentum. Sooner or later, however, the key US–Russian relationship will keep snagging on issues like Belarus, as Moscow continues its determined pursuit of restoring Russian great power status and recapturing former dominions.

What of Belarus itself? Will its society be content to accept Lukashenka’s latest diktat without demur? If there is resistance, will it seriously threaten the ex-collective farm chairman?

Generally speaking, the degree of resistance by vassal states to Moscow’s domination during the Soviet period, and the development of stable and prosperous democracies since then, have depended on the strength of national sentiment and the maturity of civil society in each country or region. Despite some revival of civil society in the last couple of years, Belarus has not been one of the stronger post-Soviet states in either respect. The national language – close to Russian – has not had a secure hold in most of its territory in recent times. Russian is now dominant in most of Belarus. A small minority speaks Belarusian by preference, but Russian is overwhelmingly the language of public discourse. (In this respect it is unlike Ukraine where, in the west and much of the central regions, Ukrainian is dominant or holds its own.)

Although it had its own representation at the United Nations when it was part of the Soviet Union, Belarus was essentially a loyal Soviet province rather than a recognisable nation or centre of nationalist resistance like the Baltic states, for example, or even Ukraine. Despite rediscovering Belarusian nationalism when it suited his interests, Lukashenka is probably still a typical Soviet Russian as much as he is a Belarusian. Though he recently startled an audience by speaking fluent Belarusian in public, he does so seldom and appears to care little about its status or future. Nationalists and some oppositionists try to keep the language alive, but they are up against not only the Russifying policy of the authorities but also the apathy of most of the population.

Belarus suffered far greater casualties and devastation than Russia during World War II. The once large and culturally influential Jewish and Polish minorities have been devastated by war, genocide, Stalinism and discriminatory policies in the later Soviet period. Eighty per cent of Belarusians are now Orthodox, like the Russians, and the

Jews and Catholic Poles have been replaced by a large (12 per cent) Russian, mainly immigrant, population fostered by Moscow. So the population is now ethnically and religiously largely homogeneous and increasingly Russified.

Moreover, most of the country fared relatively well in the later Soviet period, receiving a disproportionate share of industrial investment. And conservative economic policies and Russian subsidies since 1990 have helped Belarus avoid some of the disruption in living standards seen elsewhere in former republics. All these factors have meant that the population is broadly pro-Russian in outlook. Indeed, some of the leading opposition candidates in the presidential elections were rumoured to be accepting support from Moscow, and they certainly explicitly favoured better relations with Russia, as well as with the West.

Discontent with Lukashenka's rule has been growing in recent years, as was evident during the last two presidential election campaigns. And, even if some Russian support is reinstated for now, Belarus is heading for a difficult period. As harder economic times set in, Lukashenka's stocks could sink further. But neither democratisation nor a colour revolution by the spirited but divided opposition seems likely any time soon.

Since the crackdown, Lukashenka has purged his leadership, appointed a new prime minister and issued a decree ordering further liberalisation of the economy, which suggests that he is looking to Chinese rather than European economic models. Furthering links with new friends like China and Venezuela will also help him to hedge against overbearing behaviour by Russia. They have the additional advantage that they won't be asking tiresome questions about human rights and democracy.

This text is taken from *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II*, by John Besemeres, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.