

The corruption of Belarus

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A fragile democracy struggles to resist attempts to reinstate an authoritarian stranglehold in a country most Americans have never heard of - Belarus. Earlier this month, the news media covered demonstrations in this small former republic of the Soviet Union that have the potential to turn revolutionary. The conflict is between those who want a vibrant and free market democracy, led by members of the parliament, and the president and his supporters, who appear to want a dictatorial state bearing a closer resemblance to fascism than traditional communism. Belarus is slightly smaller than Kansas, with a population of 10 million people, tucked between Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland. It has spent much of the last 1,200 years as part of or occupied by one or more of its neighbors, plus the Germans - but most often the Russians. The proximity to Russia makes the present situation in Belarus especially volatile.

In 1994, the Belarussians elected as president Alyaksandr G. Lukashenka, a man about whom they knew little. Shortly before the last election, he obtained name recognition as head of a commission that documented the considerable corruption in the previous government. This reputation as a corruption fighter propelled him into the presidency, despite the fact that his previous experience had only been as a manager of a state-owned farm.

Mr. Lukashenka in office first appeared to be a radical reformer, but he quickly reversed the process of change, and now presides over the least reformed economy in the region. The results have been predictable; the economy has shrunk by more than one-third over the past two years. The relatively small legal private sector has been faced with exorbitant levels of taxation and regulation, and many price controls have been reinstated.

Mr. Lukashenka clearly does not brook much criticism, and rather than just whine about the press and the elected parliament as most Western politicians would do, he has taken direct action. After peaceful demonstrations in April on the anniversary of the Chernobyl accident, he threw a number of the opposition members of parliament in jail for several weeks without formal charges. He has since waged a campaign against the independent press by shutting down non-government radio and TV, and has forbidden the state-owned presses to print most of the opposition papers. Members of the press and opposition have been subject to beatings and break-ins by government thugs. Regrettably, this crackdown has drawn little attention in the Western media for a referendum but not to set the date, nor the wording of the resolution, powers which are reserved for parliament. The parliament has postponed the date until Nov. 24, when parliamentary elections are scheduled to fill in the remaining 61 seats out of 260. But Mr. Lukashenka is ignoring the parliament and is soliciting (or extorting) private donations to pay for the Nov. 7 vote.

In order to lock his hold on power, Mr. Lukashenka called for an "All Belarussian National Congress," which has no legal standing, to meet in Minsk, the capital, on Oct. 19. The delegates are mostly supporters of Mr. Lukashenka, and were expected to pass resolutions that the president wants. The opposition tried to organize their own alternative Congress for the 18 and 19 of October, and called for demonstrations on those dates.

Most Western governments have been trying quietly to pressure the Lukashenka government to follow normal democratic processes and abide by international conventions of human rights. Almost all foreign aid has been suspended, as have most World Bank and IMF support programs. So far this seems to be having little effect, with some of Mr. Lukashenka's supporters arguing that there is a "CIA conspiracy" against the government. The Yeltsin government has been urging Mr. Lukashenka to compromise with his critics, but both former Yeltsin national security chief Alexander Lebed and Slavo-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy have been vocal supporters of Mr. Lukashenka.

Mr. Lukashenka has never been to the West, and seems to be almost totally ignorant of real world economics. Late last month, I met with members of the parliament in Minsk who were both opponents and supporters of Mr. Lukashenka. What struck me was that his supporters, including the old communists, were almost all untraveled and

uninformed about the outside world. As one of the leading communist deputies said to me, "I don't want to go to Western Europe or America, because I am sure I have nothing to learn."

Belarus' current situation is all the more tragic because the country has such potential. The population is well-educated and highly skilled, and with the right leadership, Belarus could quickly become a stable and prosperous nation. Yet it is in danger this time not from a foreign enemy, but from ambitious know-nothings produced at home.

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