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End of the prisoners' dilemma

Jamestown Foundation (04.09.2015) - In mid-August 2015, two major events took center stage in media coverage of Belarus: the trip to Ukraine of Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei as well as the release of six people, labeled political prisoners in the West, by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who pardoned them ostensibly out of dedication to "the tenets of humanism."

Makei's visit to Ukraine lasted from August 12 to 16, unusually long for such official trips. Not only did Makei meet with his Ukrainian counterpart and with President Petro Poroshenko, but he also met Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius, who happened to be in Ukraine at the same time. Moreover, out of his five days in Ukraine, Makei spent three in Odesa, where he spoke with Governor Mikheil Saakashvili, whose personality and "gubernatorial" appointment are irritants for the Kremlin. Valer Karbalevich from Radio Liberty hypothesizes that Makei's visit had three major goals: to galvanize Belarus's peace-making mission in the face of brewing conflagration in southeastern Ukraine; to reverse the recent steep decline in Belarus's exports to Ukraine; and to create the impression that Belarus is interested in channeling its exports to third countries through the Odesa seaport. This is what Ukraine wants to see happen, but not necessarily Belarus, which is satisfied with continuing to use Lithuanian and Latvian ports.

The release of six prisoners, one week later, generated even more resonance and conflicting commentaries than Makei's diplomatic trip to Ukraine. The recently-freed prisoner with the highest name recognition is Nikolay Statkevich, a 2010 presidential hopeful who, in May 2011, was sentenced to six years in prison for his alleged role in leading the assault on a major government compound on election night of December 19, 2010. A June 2015 survey by an independent pollster revealed Statkevich had the support of 6.5 percent of the electorate. Notably, Statkevich never petitioned Lukashenka for clemency, which is at least in part why he has remained in prison as long as he has. Other freed prisoners are Nikolai Dedok and Igor Olinevich, self-proclaimed anarchists who threw Molotov cocktails at the Russian embassy building; and Evgenii Vaskovich and Artyom Prokopenko, who were sentenced for carrying out a similar attack on the Mogilev regional headquarters of the Belarusian KGB.

Lukashenka's decision to pardon these people has at least two implications. First, at an informal ministerial meeting in Luxembourg, on September 4–5, the foreign ministers of the European Union member countries will consider suspending travel sanctions on Lukashenka and 200 other Belarusian officials as well as dropping economic sanctions against 18 Belarusian companies. In August, 24 people and 7 companies were freed from EU sanctions due to the "disappearance of the grounds" for maintaining them. It is unlikely that EU sanctions will be canceled altogether. But the release of Belarus's political prisoners has been the main condition for their suspension, which now appears likely.

The second implication has to do with the Belarusian opposition, which had failed to promote a single presidential candidate. Some of the longest-acting leaders of the opposition, such as Anatoly Lebedko and Sergei Kaliakin, have now failed to collect 100,000 signatures required for registration by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). For example, only 52,000 signatures were reportedly collected on behalf of Lebedko. In contrast, as many as 107,000 signatures have been collected on behalf of Tatyana Korotkevich, who, until recently, was unknown in Belarus and who represents the Speak the Truth political campaign, founded by Vladimir Neklyaeu. Thus, assuming the signatures in her support are endorsed upon verification by the CEC, Korotkevich may become the de facto single candidate with opposition credentials. Moreover, Korotkevich may actually be informally endorsed by the official political elite as someone who represents a legitimate opposition as opposed to the so-called fifth column—that is, people denounced as such by Lukashenka for their alleged total accountability to foreign sponsors. Some early indications of potential cooptation of Korotkevich into the political beau monde consist of Lukashenka's conciliatory statement in regard to her, a neutral article about her in a major Belarusian daily, and also "encouraging" statements by CEC chairperson Lidia Ermoshina, who expressed hope that Korotkevich will remain strong and not be "hounded" by other activists of the opposition.

Praise dispensed by officialdom on any member of the opposition is dubious at best, but Ermoshina's statement may, in fact, reflect the current political reality in the country. The opposition appears pervaded by a more vicious variety of internecine struggle than ever before. First, the authenticity of Korotkevich's 100,000 signatures is being openly questioned by many in the opposition. The suspicion is that the "regime" may have collected her signatures for her. Ironically, this suspicion reflects the memory of 2010, when at least some registered presidential hopefuls failed to collect the requisite signatures to run in the election. Second, Korotkevich is being denied support by the most well-known opposition leaders, who call upon her to withdraw from the race if she is registered by the CEC. Such a protest action would send a message to Belarusians and, above all, to the West, that the elections are a fake and that Lukashenka's future victory in these elections should not be legitimized in the eyes of the world.

In the opposition media, Lukashenka's release of the remaining political prisoners is being described as a ploy to placate the West. Ironically, in the "patriotic" Russian media, whose overall views are worlds apart from the pro-Western Belarusian opposition, the interpretation of the event is actually the same. In contrast, writing for the "conservative" online magazine *Nomos*, Piotra Piatrouski claims that the prisoners' release exposes Belarus to three risks: the mobilization of radical and extremist elements of society, a discrediting of the Belarusian legal system, and a further discrediting of Belarus's political regime without any real hope for dividends. Among other things, Piatrouski points out that in the West itself, prison terms for identical transgressions (e.g., an assault on a government building) are actually longer than in Belarus, and ultra-left terrorists and anarchists are routinely caught and jailed.

Be that as it may, the Belarusian electoral campaign, which until recently seemed predictable and boring, is now gaining zest. But it remains to be seen if Belarus will actually benefit from that.

EU praises release of political prisoners in Belarus

Associated Press (23.08.2015) - <http://news.yahoo.com/eu-praises-release-political-prisoners-belarus-113438233.html> - The European Union praised Belarus' release of political prisoners as "important progress" in its efforts to improve relations with the West, while the most prominent of those freed described it as a cynical attempt by the authoritarian government to gain access to badly needed Western credits.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on Saturday evening unexpectedly pardoned all six political prisoners in the former Soviet republic, including former opposition presidential candidate Nikolai Statkevich, who spent nearly five years in prison.

He was greeted at the Minsk train station late Saturday by hundreds of supporters chanting "Hero."

"I will continue to fight for a free, independent and European Belarus," the 59-year-old veteran opposition leader said. "They didn't break me in prison, neither with humiliation or isolation. Belarus should overcome the fear and free itself from this dictatorship in the center of Europe."

Statkevich connected his release with the Belarusian government's need for credits to help it survive the economic downturn, saying "the dictatorship ran out of money."

The EU and United States had set the freeing of political prisoners as a condition for easing economic sanctions, which were toughened after Lukashenko's government violently suppressed protests on the night of the 2010 presidential election.

Belarus holds its next presidential election in October, with Lukashenko all but certain to win a fifth term. Statkevich was among those who filed to run against him, but last month election officials turned down his candidacy.

The releases "represent important progress in the efforts toward the improvement of relations between the EU and Belarus," EU officials Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn said in a statement late Saturday. "We now expect the authorities of Belarus to remove all restrictions on the enjoyment of full civil and political rights of the released."

Rhodes: Combating Eurasia's challenge to basic human rights

The pre-eminence of state over individual is rising again

By Aaron Rhodes

The Washington Times (25.06.2014) /

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/25/rhodes-combating-eurasias-challenge-to-basic-human/> - Former state farm director [Alexander Lukashenko](#) has ruled [Belarus](#) with an iron fist for 20 years. He and his regime have enjoyed some support from citizens who, deprived of information and civil and political rights, don't understand democratic alternatives, and preferred life in the Soviet Union, which [Mr. Lukashenko](#) opposed leaving.

Unrest, however, has been growing, and the regime only stays in power by manipulating elections and intimidating opponents with violence. Now it has been given a fresh coat of philosophical paint. Mixed by Russian political philosopher [Alexandr Dugin](#) and marketed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, the new color is "Eurasia," trotted out as the alternative to neoliberal Atlanticism.

During the current meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, Belarusian Ambassador [Mikhail Khvostov](#), when confronted with a report on egregious violations of

basic freedoms, responded in pretentious "Eurasian" language apparently plucked from such philosophical luminaries as Carl Schmitt and [Martin Heidegger](#), both of whom glorified fascism and provided the Third Reich with fancy intellectual window-dressing.

Defending his one-party state and a legal system instrumentalized to maintain power, [Mr. Khvostov](#) said his government had been successful at "organizing the political life of society." The legal system is "secondary to politics," and "without politics, there is no purpose, and without purpose, there is no state." The state, [Mr. Khvostov](#) intoned, "is the guarantor of our system of values and way of life."

These ideas are, of course, antithetical to the concept of universal, individual human rights and the rule of law. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea and Mr. Putin's ongoing infiltration and political destabilization of Ukraine, commentators have tried to fit many labels on an ideology that confidently aims to vanquish liberal democracy. It has been called, among other things, "19th-century Russian imperialism," "neo-czarism," "nationalism," "national socialism," "neo-totalitarianism," "neo-Sovietism," "fascism" and "neo-fascism."

We need to focus less on labels and more on the meaning of this political theory for basic freedoms. In [Mr. Dugin's](#) book "The Fourth Political Theory," he proclaims the virtue of a seamless unity between state and the individual, as opposed to a society in which independent institutions struggle to ensure freedom of individuals from state control. Freedom, for [Mr. Dugin](#), means freedom from disharmony between one's own ethos and that of society; from the dichotomy of "subject and object." His book reads like a turgid, utopian college term paper from the 1970s. However, we cannot afford to dismiss it for being full of obtuse language used by corrupt intellectuals such as Schmitt and [Heidegger](#).

The author of the U.N. report, Miklos Haraszti, is known for his penetrating and poetic denunciation of totalitarianism as a Hungarian dissident and his later work in defense of freedom of media. He was appointed to monitor [Belarus](#) in 2012, largely in response to brutality that surrounded presidential elections in 2010. Candidates opposing [Mr. Lukashenko](#) were beaten, arrested and jailed. The frustrations of thousands of protesters boiled over into a riot, met in turn with disproportionate police violence. In his report, Mr. Haraszti described a system in which all non-state media have been shut down, independent trade unions are banned, human rights groups are harassed and their leaders incarcerated, and some students have been pressed into forced labor. Legislation proposed by the government would prohibit agricultural workers from leaving their jobs.

Yet these practices were defended as only the business of [Belarus](#) by numerous delegations to the U.N., which demanded an end even to speaking of specific human rights violations in the Human Rights Council. A growing chorus of "like-minded" countries want to sap the U.N. system even of its weak tools for holding members accountable. They want instead to debate only in anodyne, "thematic" terms. Defenders of [Belarus](#) included Latin American countries such as Nicaragua and Venezuela (which said human rights reports are weapons for "imperial domination by the hegemonistic bloc"); U.S. ally Azerbaijan; China, which preferred "constructive dialogue" about "complex and sensitive" issues; Myanmar; and Syria, which said the only aim of such reports was to "denigrate" opponents. Eurasianism, while associated with Slavophile state absolutism, is embraced far beyond Eurasia.

Mr. Haraszti pushed back, saying the way to solving human rights problems was to respect the rights of citizens and the freedom of civil society. However, no delegate from any democracy bothered to confront the anti-human rights rhetoric at the U.N. with strong countervailing ideas. In general, references to freedom are increasingly rare in the international human rights system, receding in proportion to the rise of a new rhetoric of

human rights that concerns itself not with freedom, but focuses instead on positive state obligations to provide economic security.

The upsurge of the Eurasian model, despite its ugly pedigree, finds a foothold not only among authoritarian states, but also with European populist parties, which have just made huge gains in EU parliamentary elections. In order to effectively counter it, leaders in liberal democracies need to bone up on the ideas underpinning the liberty their citizens enjoy. They need to join a battle of ideas that they seem now to be losing by default.

Aaron Rhodes is a co-founder of the Freedom Rights Project and president of the Forum for Religious Freedom — Europe. He was executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights between 1993 and 2007.

Journalist released on bail still faces prison

Andrzej Poczobut was released on bail on 30 June in Belarus, however he still faces a prison sentence of almost eight years on charges of "libelling the President". He has been targeted for his work as a journalist and for the legitimate exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International (04.07.2012) - Journalist Andrzej Poczobut was released on 30 June under bail conditions which state that he cannot leave Grodno, western Belarus, where he lives with his family, and must appear for interrogation when asked by investigators and register with the police three times a month. He is officially charged with "libelling the President" under Article 367 (2) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus for 12 articles that were published in Belarusian independent media. Andrzej Poczobut believes that his arrest is an attempt to intimidate him and prevent him from carrying out his journalistic activities. He has refused to give testimony or cooperate with the investigation.

Andrzej Poczobut has written about prisoners of conscience in Belarus, criticizing the authorities' response to a wave of "silent protests" in the country. He also criticized the process and decision made in the criminal case of Uladzislau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau, who were both executed in March 2012 in connection with a series of bomb attacks in Belarus.

In March 2011, Andrzej Poczobut was charged with "insulting the President" and "libelling the President" for articles that he had written for the Gazeta Wyborcza. On 5 July 2011, he received a three-year suspended prison sentence. Together with this sentence and new charges he could face imprisonment of up to seven years and nine months.

Andrzej Poczobut was arrested on 21 June 2012 in his apartment in Grodno. His apartment and office were searched and his computer and documents were confiscated. His computer has been sent for expert examination.

Please write immediately in Belarusian, Russian or your own language:

- Calling on the authorities to drop the charges against Andrzej Poczobut immediately;
- Urging them to guarantee the right to freedom of expression in line with their international human rights obligations, including Article 19 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

Please send appeals before 14 August to:

President
Alyaksandr Lukashenka
Administratsia Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus
ul.Karla Marksa, 38
220016 Minsk,
Belarus
Fax: +375 17 226 06 10/ +375 17 222 38 72
Email: contact@president.gov.by

Salutation: Dear President Lukashenka

General Prosecutor
Alyaksandr Koniuk
Internatsionalnaya str. 22
220050 Minsk,
Belarus
Fax: +375 17 226 42 52 (Please say "fax" clearly if someone answers)
Email: info@prokuratura.gov.by

Salutation: Dear General Prosecutor