

Anna Prokofieva:
Why Transition in Belarus is Slow

In post-soviet states, the transition to democracy is generally taking longer than in other countries in Eastern Europe. These days, Belarus could be called a Soviet reservation under the totalitarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, its first president.



This situation is not just the result of political repression by a leader and his bureaucratic apparatus; it has deep roots in history and social traditions. While Europe looks back at a hundred years' worth of democratic development, post-soviet states have only been independent for a few short years.

It was first the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union which fostered the social behaviour we see in post-soviet states. Belarus, in particular, was used as an experimental laboratory for reforms and ideologies during most of the 20th century. The Soviet Union first tested its ideology on a small sample of a particularly obedient population – Belarus. This is the tradition which has led to the current social and political situation.

Culturally, Belarusian society was always described as tolerant and fairly passive. Yet it is no accident that Belarus also had the biggest partisan movements. Belarusian society would rather adapt to a new regime than fight; but only while there is enough food and an acceptable quality of life. Poverty is the only thing that can make this society move.

With the escalation of the conflict in neighbouring Ukraine, the Belarusian economy - small and medium enterprises, factories and trade – deteriorated sharply. The initial geographical advantage being situated on a cross road turned into a dramatic disadvantage. This has had a clear impact on how Belarusians view Russia.

Let's look at two polls done by IISEPS (<http://www.iiseps.org/>) based on the question "What would you do if Russia decided to annex Belarus as South-Western region?"

When first asked in June 2014, only 14.2 percent of Belarusians said they “will defend my motherland with a weapon”. Three months later, when the Russian ruble had started falling and fewer goods and people were passing through Belarus because of the sanctions, IISEPS asked the same question again. This time, 31 percent of Belarusians said they “will defend my motherland with a weapon.”

Clearly, fewer people are in favor of what the Russian army is doing in Ukraine. Despite the fact that Russian propaganda is powerful, in Belarus people still have a strong sense of identity and believe their country should stay independent.

Under these circumstances, what can Europe do to help a peaceful transition in Belarus when two recent uprisings have failed?

Quite honestly, I am sceptical. Both the EU and the Polish governments have long supported projects dedicated to the development of democracy in Belarus. Since the last elections alone, the European Commission has given 56 million euro to the opposition movement. Yet now, six months before the next elections, the opposition has neither drawn up a programme nor put forward any candidates.

Not enough money? I would conclude: wrong aims. Change should be done from inside, not from outside. Only social change can bring about a peaceful transition. Here, the European Union can help by supporting highly visible, long-term projects that aim to support social change in this country.