

# Belarus: Dictatorship or Democracy?

A Review of Stewart Parker's book: "The Last Soviet Republic"

By [Gearóid Ó Colmáin](#)

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Since the pronouncement of former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2008 calling the democratically elected president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko "Europe's last dictator", the image and reputation of this noble country has been fanatically tarnished by the mainstream media.

The irony here is that Belarus is indeed deeply familiar with the iniquities of dictatorship. They, more than any other country, suffered the worst of Nazi atrocities during World War II. Belarus has always been a multicultural country with Jews, Christians and Muslims living side by side for centuries. This deep tolerance for cultural and religious differences is still celebrated in Belarus today. Yet the European Union, Israel and the United States, never cease from spreading atrocious lies and disinformation concerning the Republic of Belarus.

Belarus has generally received scant coverage from alternative and left-wing media, which is rather surprising considering the fact that Fidel Castro has awarded Alexander Lukashenko with the order of Jose Marti, the highest honour bestowed upon friends of the Cuban people. In a recent visit to Belarus, the president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez praised Belarus as a model of socialist development, one which Venezuela should emulate. Yet there is a paucity of books and articles about this country and its 'controversial' leader. One notable exception to this hiatus comes from Stewart Parker who published a clear and revealing book on Belarus and the policies of Alexander Lukashenko in particular. For readers seeking an insight into this fascinating country, Parker's *The Last Soviet Republic: Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus* (2007) is a brilliant exposé of the lies and distortions emanating from the European Union and the US concerning 'human rights' violations in Belarus and the absence of 'democracy'. What follows is an attempt to summarise and evaluate the findings of this valuable study.

Alexander Lukashenko came to power after a landslide victory in 1994. A former director in a collective farm during the USSR era, Lukashenko was one of the few Belarusian politicians to oppose the break up of the Soviet Union in 1990. Although the Belarusian leader had always been an outspoken critic of the USSR's corruption, he remained committed to Marxism-Leninism, and opposed the rampant privatisation proposed by Boris Yeltsin and his followers. In the final years of the Soviet regime, Lukashenko, then a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, formed a group called 'Communists for Democracy'. Lukashenko argued that the real problem in the USSR was the decline in democratic participation and the parasitism and corruption of the ruling bureaucracy. He also advocated more autonomy for the USSR's constituent Republics.

Belarus had always been the most advanced Soviet Republics, which high achievements in education and science. In spite of economic stagnation and increasing corruption in other

republics of the USSR, Belarus's state planning had continued to yield impressive results with economic growth continuing throughout the Brezhnev era. In 1993 Lukashenko was appointed head of an 'anti-corruption committee'. One of the numerous myths repeatedly circulated since the fall of the USSR is that a majority of the Soviet people wanted free market capitalism. This was certainly not the case in Soviet Republic of Belarus. It was Alexander Lukashenko's defence of Soviet values, together with his outspoken criticisms of the Communist Party of the USSR and the apparatchiks of the soviet regime that earned him the respect and confidence of the Belarusian people. In 1994 Lukashenko was elected President of Belarus with over 80 percent of the votes.

Finding a place for Belarus in the post-soviet chaos was a difficult task for the young president. One of the first issues concerned the national flag. The BPF, a nationalist party, wanted to restore the white, red and white flag of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had been the national flag under the puppet regime of the German empire in 1918. It was also used by the collaborators with the Nazi Wehrmacht during World War II. The people finally settled for maintaining the Soviet flag minus the hammer and sickle. Radio Free Europe later lamented the dropping of the Nazi collaboration flag as a 'heavy blow to democratic forces'.

In the intervening years since the fall of the USSR and the rise of Lukashenko over 15 billion dollars had been siphoned out of the country. Privatisation and the lifting of price-controls had caused inflation to soar with prices rising over 432 times. The Soviet economy was being replaced by mafia gangsters. Western 'freedom' and 'democracy' was taking its toll!

Through a series of referenda Lukashenko was able to set in motion a democratic social programme which has made Belarus one of the most prosperous and least-corrupt countries in Eastern Europe. Just like Venezuela, a clause in the constitution decided by a referendum permits the indefinite re-election of the president should the Belarusian people wish to do so. Over 80 percent of industry in Belarus remains in public ownership. In 1996 the unemployment figure in the country amounted to 4 percent. Lukashenko's administration has since reduced this figure to little over 1 percent, one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world. Industrial output rose by 9.7 percent in 2004. Wages have been increasing significantly every year since Lukashenko's accession to power.

Economic growth in Socialist Belarus has been so impressive. Even the World Bank and the IMF have had to acknowledge this incontrovertible fact. In June 2005, the World Bank published a report titled 'Belarus: Window of Opportunity' which admitted that the Belarusian economy was growing steadily, while the IMF admitted that Belarus had significant wage increases coupled with low government debt. Good news for Belarus, bad news for the World Bank and IMF, whom Lukashenko, speaking before the Russian Duma in 1999, had called 'a pack of swindlers'.

In a world where the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, Belarus offers real hope that economics does not have to function that way. According to the system developed by the Italian statistician Corrado Gini, known as the Gini coefficient, Belarus ranks as the most equal country on earth.

The Gini coefficient for Belarus in 2005 was 0.217, the lowest out of 113 countries. In Belarus, the lowest income is only five times lower than the highest income. This means that the notion of 'corporate greed' one hears about in the United States and Europe is virtually non-existent in the Republic of Belarus.

Belarus also comes out on top in education. Adult literacy in Belarus is the highest in the CIS nations at 99.7 percent. This is because Belarus spends more money on education than most other nations. Over 10 percent of the Belarusian state budget goes into education. This surpasses all other CIS countries, the USA and most European countries.

In contrast to Western 'democracies' where social security is being systematically destroyed to sustain the financial oligarchies, male workers in Belarus retire at 60 while women retire at 55 with full pension entitlements.

Needless to say, the attitude of the EU and the United States nomenclatura, that is to say, the self-proclaimed 'international community' is that Belarus is not a 'democracy'. Media disinformation has backed this hostility by European and US elites to Belarus by publishing an impressive quantity of lies. At the 60th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2005 President Lukashenko put the US 'human rights' obsession thus:

'If there are no pretexts for intervention-imaginary ones are created. To this end a very convenient banner was chosen, democracy and human rights, and not in the original sense of the rule of people and personal dignity, but solely and exclusively in the interpretation of the US leadership'.

In order to promote the US 'interpretation' of human rights, President Clinton sent Michael Kozak to Belarus in 2000. Kozak distinguished himself during the 1970s in the Iran/contra scandal where he was instrumental in organising the sale of arms to the contra terrorists in Nicaragua in exchange for cocaine, which the CIA sold to poor Americans on the streets of Los Angeles, the same poor people who would subsequently be incarcerated for 'possession of narcotics'. While poor people were forced to make military uniforms in US prisons for their drug convictions, Kozak was one of Washington's key handlers of Daniel Noriega, a CIA narco-trafficker and dictator of Panama. Clinton had deep confidence in Kozak's democratic credentials as he himself was governor of Arkansas, from where the CIA operation was conducted. The US-funded terrorist campaign in Nicaragua cost the lives of over 30,000 people, most of them civilians. Kozak had the perfect credentials for spreading 'democracy' American style in socialist Belarus.

Upon his arrival in Minsk, US ambassador Michael Kozak, Clinton's former CIA gun-for-drugs terrorist handler, now US 'pro-democracy' diplomat, was quick to make contact with his European counterparts. Representing the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Hans Georg Wieck. Wieck worked closely with Kozak to groom 'opposition' candidates in Belarus suitable to Washington and Brussels.

When Lukashenko won another landslide victory in the presidential elections of 2001, the OSCE condemned the elections as unfair without producing a shred of evidence to corroborate their claims

After the September 11th attacks in New York, the US showed the real motives behind the 'global war on terror' when Senator John McCain declared

'Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus cannot long survive in a world where the United States and Russia enjoy a strategic partnership and the United States is serious about its commitment to end outlaw regimes whose conduct threatens us...September 11th opened our eyes to the status of Belarus as a national security threat'.

McCain was referring to the sale of arms by Belarus to the CIA's disobedient puppet dictator Saddam Hussein, a claim denied by President Lukashenko. Here we see the US accusing other countries of crimes which it itself committed for years when it sold arms to the Iraqi dictator. But the real crime committed by Lukashenko was his progressive social policies which are setting a bad example for other countries strangled by the financial interests of the US global oligarchy; US 'national security' meaning the security of the financial elite and 'global war on terror' meaning global war on freedom.

But the US was determined to launch its global terror campaign against any state that dared to resist casino capitalism. Belarus and Lukashenko himself would pay a heavy price for standing up to the IMF and the World Bank. In 2004 the United States proceeded to take action with the passing of the Belarus Democracy Act, calling for sanctions against Belarus and funding for 'pro-democracy' groups. Most opposition groups in Belarus today receive funding from the United States government, paid for by cash-strapped US tax payers. This funding almost culminated in the so-called 'denim revolution' in 2006, a CIA-funded attempt to arouse popular opposition to the Lukashenko government in order to replace it with a pro-US regime. However, unlike their neighbours in other Eastern European countries, the Belarusians did not take the US bait and Lukashenko stayed in power.

After the failure of the 'Denim Revolution', the EU imposed a travel ban on Lukashenko and 30 ministers, preventing them from traveling to any part of the EU. This shows the extent of the anxiety among the EU elite in the face of Belarus's popular democracy.

Stewart Parker sites a number of poignant examples in his book which reveal the extent to which reveal systematic anti-democratic interference in Belarusian affairs by the United States and their vassal-states in Europe. What is particularly 'totalitarian' about socialist Belarus is not the Belarusian state, but rather the way in which that state is portrayed by the so-called democratic authorities of the EU and the US.

But the absurdities promoted by the mainstream media come from all sides. Lukashenko has been accused of anti-Semitism, in spite of the fact that the thriving Jewish community in the country seem to be unaware of this fact. In fact, the chief Rabbi of Belarus has praised the Belarussian president for his support of the Jewish community, yet the EU, the US and Israel insist that Lukashenko is 'anti-Semitic' and also opposes 'free media'.

The Belarussian government has also been accused of internet censorship and media control. More lies! The Open Net Initiative carried out a study after the 'disputed' elections of 2006 to see if the claims about Internet censorship were true. They "found no evidence of systematic and comprehensive interference with the Net. Any regime-directed tampering that may have taken place was fairly subtle, causing disruptions to access, but never turning off the alternative information tap"

Another slander against the Belarusian president came from Russia's 'free media'. In 1995, Dr. Marcus Zeiner interviewed Lukashenko for the German newspaper Handelsblatt. The interview with Dr. Martin Zeiner was cleverly mistranslated to include positive references to Hitler. This was confirmed by the interviewer himself who subsequently said "'a tape of the interview had been quoted out of context and with the sequence of comments altered"

The BBC continues to propagate this lie about Lukashenko which only serves to prove the desperation of the corporate media in the face of popular leaders whose policies threaten their empire of lies.

Stewart Parker's book *The Last Soviet Republic*, is an indispensable guide to a country and a leader the bourgeois media does not want you to know about. It is, to my knowledge, the only comprehensive study of a country that only receives attention when vicious opportunities for anti-socialist propaganda present themselves. We have much to learn from this brave little country, that sacrificed so much to defeat the forces of fascism of Europe's past and those same fascist forces which have resurfaced today in the name of 'human rights', 'democracy' and 'freedom'. In a world dominated by the ideology of the financial elite, those who stand for the common man and woman are beaten down ruthlessly. Alexander Lukashenko stands for democracy, human rights and freedom, which is why the corporate media call him a 'dictator'.

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