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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

## *And Then There Was One*

**T**HE POMPOUS dictator of beleaguered Belarus must be feeling awfully lonely. After the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia last week, Alexander Lukashenko is the last unelected leader on the continent of Europe. His status as lone survivor reflects an astonishing triumph of democracy during the past decade, and an astonishing opportunity that must not be squandered. How the next U.S. president would seize that opportunity is—should be—a defining issue of the presidential campaign.

Just 15 years ago, an Iron Curtain divided Europe's democracies from its many dictatorships, and there seemed little prospect of change. In those days, every U.S. administration and Congress understood the importance of standing up to totalitarianism. After the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, some countries transformed themselves with heroic speed; places like Poland, Estonia and Slovenia built democratic institutions so quickly that young people there cannot even imagine ration cards or imprisoned dissidents. Other nations stumbled, slid backward, moved forward again with difficulty. In still others, Communist apparatchiks remade themselves as nationalist autocrats and stifled democracy in its crib.

Now almost all those leaders are gone. Slovakia, Croatia and, we hope, Serbia can boast of democratic governments. The policies of the Clinton administration and its allies—the sanctions and pressure, aid to democrats and military resistance to aggression and crimes against humanity—have helped produce this result. Even Mr. Lukashenko, like Mr. Milosevic before him, feels compelled to feign democracy. He has scheduled a phony parliamentary election for Oct. 15, and his own term expires next year. If the West steadfastly supports Bela-

rus's democrats and refuses to recognize the sham elections, Belarusians may have the strength to follow in Serbian footsteps.

That will not mean the end of their troubles—only the beginning of the freedom to grapple with them. In Serbia now, the difficulties are immense: a ruined economy, an infrastructure damaged by NATO bombing, a legacy of ethnic hatred. The newly elected leader, Vojislav Kostunica, undoubtedly will follow some policies distasteful to the West. NATO's job in Kosovo may become more difficult.

But these are the difficulties of opportunity: how much more cheerful to contemplate than the challenges posed only two weeks ago by the bloody Milosevic regime. The West learned 10 years ago, or should have learned, that the moment to help can be brief. Now, in countries where the West fell short, it has been given—partly through its own efforts, partly through luck, most of all through the courage of people in the regions—a second chance.

Candidate George W. Bush has argued against extensive U.S. engagement in nation-building, in democracy promotion, in keeping the peace. He and his running mate have suggested that parts of Europe may be outside the U.S. sphere of interest, that the Americans should withdraw and let the Europeans take over. But what could be more in the U.S. interest, including in the interest of U.S. national security, than a European continent at peace, democratic and free? What could be more in the U.S. interest than spreading Poland's success to Serbia and Belarus, completing the vision that President Harry Truman and other postwar leaders, Democratic and Republican alike, sketched out a half-century ago? Even now, such an outcome is neither guaranteed nor easy to achieve; all the more reason for the United States to stay engaged.