

*A European Alternative
for Belarus*

*Report of the Belarus Task Force
of the International Centre
for Democratic Transition (ICDT)*

A European
A EUROPEAN ALTERNATIVE
Alternative for Belarus
FOR BELARUS

REPORT OF THE BELARUS TASK FORCE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION (ICDT)

October 2008

*With the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway,
the Eastern Europe Studies Center (EESC), the Foundation Amicus Europae (FAE),
and the German Marshall Fund of the United States.*

*The views contained in this report represent exclusively those of the individual authors
and do not necessarily represent the opinion of sponsors or any other organizations.*

Copyright © 2008 by the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT)

All rights reserved. No part of this booklet may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT), Hungary, 1022 Budapest, Árvácska utca 12.

Printed in Hungary

CONTENTS

Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
Belarus: the winds of change?	6
Choosing between East and West – the false dilemma	7
OUR VISION FOR BELARUS	9
The possibilities for a democratic change	9
Dialog with Minsk	10
Support for democratic opposition	14
Support for civil society	18
Bringing non-censored information to Belarus	19
Improving the human rights situation	21
Broader economic cooperation	22
A smart visa policy	24
Transatlantic cooperation	25
RECOMMENDATIONS	26
AUTHORS	29
Chairman of the Belarus Task Force	29
Members of the Belarus Task Force	29
Other Authors	29

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Belarus is an important European country, and, since 2004, a neighbor of the European Union. It has numerous historical, economic, and cultural ties with the peoples of the European Union. Yet we feel that Belarus, since the mid-1990's and the election of Alexander Lukashenko as the country's President, has not received proper attention and the appropriate place on the EU's agenda which it indeed deserves.

Due to its internal domestic political circumstances, Belarus has been excluded from various European institutions and international organizations and has become an isolated quasi-pariah state. Belarus has become Europe's forgotten country, a nation which is left out of the universally beneficial process of cooperation in an increasingly prosperous and integrated Europe.

More recently, however, there is a significant increase of willingness for cooperation on the side of both the government in Minsk and Western governments. In late 2007, the Belarus Task Force was formed to help further this process with a thorough analysis of the situation and some specific recommendations.

The Belarus Task Force is chaired by Aleksander Kwasniewski, former President of Poland, and consists of a panel of highly renowned international experts representing a broad range of European countries. Most members of this group are either former Presidents or former Ministers of Foreign Affairs of their respective countries. With the following report, the Belarus Task Force hopes to draw more attention to the case of Belarus among a broad range of decision-makers in Europe as well as the United States.

An independent, democratic and open Belarus is a common European interest, shared by more and more people in Belarus as well as other actors of the international community. In order to best serve this goal, we need to promote democratic reform in the country and to strengthen the European component of the Belarusian identity. We must provide Belarus with a real European alternative.

Belarus: the winds of change?

In Belarus, a series of demonstrations and other mass events have demonstrated that there is a growing desire for change within the country, chiefly among the young, educated, urban elements of the population. Pressure for democratic change is being exerted not only by a narrow political opposition, but also by the broader civil society.

Although it is unlikely that the Belarusian opposition should or, indeed, could present a united front on all issues, it is disturbing that the Belarusian political opposition remains so strongly divided, with no single leader having widespread support within the society. There is no real dialog, let alone cooperation and coordination between the political parties and the civil society and, thus, no concrete positive program for the country's European development and no governing potential for the time being. This is especially a cause for concern with a view to the parliamentary elections that took place on September 28, 2008. The Lukashenko regime continues to exert strong pressure on the independent media, opposition groups, and independent civil society. Human rights are not respected in the country. Though, for the time being, there are no internationally recognized political prisoners in Belarus, there are still politically motivated trials, and one cannot exclude the possibility of a serious relapse in connection with or following the elections, including resurgence in political imprisonments.

After many years of barely veiled economic support coming from Russia in the form of heavily subsidized natural resources and negotiations on a Union State of Russia and Belarus, Russia effected a decisive turn by imposing a radical price rise in its energy exports. The resulting energy dispute proved to be a turning point for Belarus. Lukashenko has become more assertive of Belarusian sovereignty – today, the assertion of Belarusian sovereignty seems to be the single most important point on which the positions of Lukashenko, the Belarusian opposition and that of the European Union and the United States coincide.

On the one hand, in spite of the price hikes, the Russian energy supply to Belarus remains highly subsidized and, through exports, the net result of the price rise is still positive from the viewpoint of the influential elite groups. On the other hand, the prospects are even less bright for the country, especially if Russia continues to exert economic pressure on Belarus.

Minsk is clearly trying to reach out to the European Union, if perhaps only as part of a balancing act. Concessions include an agreement on the opening of a new European Commission Delegation in Minsk and the release of all internationally recognized political prisoners. There are signs of re-orientation and

opening, though Lukashenko is still strongly clinging on to power by re-shuffling his top officials and surrounding himself with those who are completely dependent upon his rule. According to some sources, the younger generation of experts around Lukashenko is much more pro-European than he himself, which might be interpreted as a positive sign in the long run. Currently, however, power still belongs to the old nomenclature.

Under these circumstances, the European Union policy towards Belarus is still not effective: the time is now to find innovative ways to engage with Belarus. There are encouraging signs coming from Brussels, too, which makes a review of this policy by this Task Force even more appropriate.

On the strategic level, there is an increasing chance for readiness in Belarus to draw nearer to the European Union – this is a chance that the West must not let pass by. We need to focus in a much more careful, deeper, and innovative way than our previous tactic on what the EU can offer to Belarus in the way of increased cooperation. We need to achieve the combination of a pro-European push coming from within Belarus, and readiness in Europe to engage with Belarus.

When doing this, the European Union should closely consult and cooperate with the United States. EU policy should not undermine US policy and, likewise, US policy has to understand and eventually support the EU policy of engagement. Consequently, we encourage broader and deeper cooperation between the US and EU policy actors who are active in Belarus.

Choosing between East and West – the false dilemma

Today, Belarus faces a false dilemma – one in which it supposedly has to choose between Russian economic influence and EU economic involvement. Thanks to the energy crises of the previous years the politically-driven nature of Russian economic involvement became obvious. However, European and Western investment won't come without political conditions, either. In order to attract Western investment, Belarus must provide the necessary investment climate, i.e., it must improve the rule of law, liberalize, and privatize its economy. All these economic changes will lead to democratization in the long run.

Most countries of the broadly defined Central and Eastern European (CEE) region followed the post-'89 logic of liberalization, democratization, and Euro-Atlantic integration, but this does not hold true for Belarus, which still follows a pre-'89, Cold War pattern. Accordingly, most Western action towards Belarus so

far has been overly negative rather than constructively positive. The Belarusian opposition is frequently criticized and described as being weak, fragmented, and lacking broad social support. Yet we must realize that, in the years before 1989, the opposition was in no better shape in many of the by-now successful CEE transition countries than in today's Belarus. It is difficult for a strong and united opposition to develop if the circumstances do not allow for it.

The process of transition will need a strong opposition and civil society which could mobilize broader social support for change and, thereby, could provide a catalyst for a more European orientation. The key question today is how to make the Lukashenko administration, or at least a 'critical mass' of the officials and leaders within that administration, interested in a Western orientation and thus, in the provision of the increased room for democracy that goes hand-in-hand with it. The experience of the CEE countries shows that such openings may happen if there is a split within the administration, with soft-liners successfully advocating change, and hard-liners (typically the inner circle, law enforcement and security apparatus) understanding that they have no other option than to transform. We firmly believe that such a European orientation is the only long-term guarantee for Belarusian sovereignty. The remaining question is how to convince Lukashenko's government of this. Isolation and sanctions are certainly not the right tools to do that. Any approach should be complemented by a policy of engagement.

OUR VISION FOR BELARUS

The possibilities for a democratic change

Although we recognize that the current administration has significant internal support, we believe that the overall situation requires significant changes, keeping in mind that, at the same time, a feeling of dissatisfaction with the same government is growing.

Democracy cannot be imposed from the outside and no such efforts have had long-standing, sustainable positive results. **Democracy can only develop in the minds of the people.** The outside world can only help provide some necessary conditions, e.g., to stop repression, to ensure the rule of law, the freedom of speech etc.

The Belarusian political opposition is generally weak and seriously divided. In addition to this, though opposition forces have a significant number of passive supporters, they are very weakly organized and are disconnected from large parts of the society. At this point **the opposition does not have the capacity for carrying out a systemic change, and is not yet ready to take the lead in the transition process.**

Therefore, the process of a peaceful transition can only be realistically imagined through a dialog with the current administration, as was also suggested by certain groups of the Belarusian opposition almost a year ago. In parallel with this, the rights of the opposition have to be ensured. In this process the **experience of Central and Eastern European countries** could prove to be very useful. Consequently, **rather than some sort of revolution, a negotiated, peaceful transition seems to be a more realistic option.**

A peaceful transition at this point would require the active participation of at least a portion of the current elite, as the opposition has neither a suitable candidate nor the power necessary to play a significant role in the transition process, at least not in the near future. The emergence of a political leader is still necessary, who could be acceptable for both sides, as happened in many of the transitions of the Central- and Eastern European countries. This compromise could be the first step on the road of peaceful transition leading to fully democratic elections.

Dialog with Minsk

While keeping in mind that the Lukashenko administration is the only 'available' negotiating partner, the Belarus Task Force intends to draw attention to certain peculiarities of negotiation with it.

First, during his long career **Alexander Lukashenko has proved many times that he must not be underestimated.** He is a rather pragmatic, cunning politician. Although Lukashenko cannot be considered a 'reliable' negotiation partner in our perception, understanding his goals and political objectives would result in the ability to predict his moves to a certain extent – namely, along with his own interests.

The administration is neither homogenous nor monolithic. Lukashenko alone cannot sustain his rule; the support of the elite around him is inevitable. These groups have a number of competing – mostly economic – interests and all aspire for key positions in the management of the most profitable companies. Under these circumstances, Lukashenko constantly needs to juggle and balance these elite groups and play them off against each other.

Lukashenko cannot show the slightest sign of weakness, as this would endanger his own position. Therefore, he will react positively only to demands which either do not expect him to accept the blame or those which provide him with an opportunity to 'save face.'

That being said, the various parts of the current opposition, both political parties, and civil society must be part of the process. No real progress is possible without their consent and active participation in the entire process. In addition to this, a lot needs to be done in order to build a certain non-political strata of the Belarusian society as well, most importantly the entrepreneurs and mid-level professional officials, the so-called 'chinovniki'.

A gradual and conditional approach

This also implies that no radical changes can be expected from President Lukashenko. **At this point he is capable of conducting only small, gradual moves** – the complexity of the elite groups around him allows only such a smooth and careful approach. Slow action provides him with the time necessary for maneuvering among the various elite groups.

Moreover, partly due to the abovementioned reasons, and partly due to his own mindset, a pragmatic way of engagement with the Belarusian government – that Lukashenko would also be able to respond to – is rather a **purely negative-conditionality-based approach**. It has to be made clear that this conditionality works in the reverse as well: for any step back, it is an illusion not to expect a negative reaction from the EU – which can either be a concrete, active measure, or simply a failure to grant a promised benefit. With suspending the visa-ban against most Belarusian leaders on 13th October for an initial 6-months period, the EU made the first step towards establishing such a conditionality-based engagement: the decision includes the possibility of re-installing the travel restrictions at any earlier time, should the government conduct improper, anti-democratic actions.

Russia has a major influence on Belarusian economic and cultural life; therefore, in the EU-Belarus relationship, Russia indeed has a special place. A group of 'Friends of Belarusian Transition' could create a common forum for problem-solving-oriented debate, as well as for building trust between the governments.

Being determined but careful

The recent positive steps of the Belarusian government induced a spectacular, supportive answer from the EU. The meeting of Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Martynov and Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski, and especially the invitation of Martynov to a European Commission meeting show not only the readiness for a change on the side of the EU, but the echoes of this are very positive on the side of Minsk as well.

However, the elections on 28 September were conducted basically in the same anti-democratic way as the previous ones had been. **The government used less obvious methods in coloring the election's results on this occasion, but their methods still clearly fell short of democratic standards**, as the OSCE report documents.

One can argue that the strong dividing lines among the opposition groups also contributed to the failure of the democratic candidates – e.g. they really did not receive enough votes – but **this does not change the fact, that the general environment of the elections was not democratic at all**. Media access was unbalanced, there was no room for a lively election campaign, representatives of the democratic opposition were not allowed to participate in electoral committees, the Belarusian method of 'early voting' brought into question the fairness of the election, and, most importantly, the vote-counting process was not transparent.

At the same time, we would like to warn everyone against overestimating the importance of the recent parliamentary elections. **In the Belarusian constitutional system the parliament has only very limited powers.** As long as this is unchanged, the parliament will remain only of symbolic importance - regardless of whether or not it includes representatives of the opposition. Consequently, **there is no need to over-dramatize the clearly negative results of the recent elections – the democratization of Belarus does not depend on the parliament, but on the will of the president and on the elite groups around him.**

Thus, despite the failed expectation, we still advise continuation of the supportive, more active EU approach, simply because, **for Lukashenko's administration, the only alternative to the increasingly pro-European orientation is Russia. The current 'in-between', balancing act position of Minsk is less and less sustainable.** Consequently, the EU needs to keep providing an attractive alternative – or at least show readiness to do so.

Besides the already mentioned decision on temporarily suspending the visa ban, there seem to be other signs of further engagement emerging from the side of the EU: the European Parliament on 9th October not only expressed its support towards visa ban decision, but also suggested the decrease of visa prices towards ordinary Belarusians.

However, is still extremely important to be cautious. It has to be kept in mind that the EU has a much slower reaction time than the government in Minsk, which is clearly monolithic at least when compared to the EU - in other words, an anti-democratic relapse can happen much faster than the EU could even react. Conditionality must be reflected in every single step of the negotiating process.

The Role of Ukraine as a mediator

Ukraine is in a good political and geographical position for being a mediator in EU-Belarus negotiations. As it is a member of neither the EU nor NATO, Ukraine is much more acceptable as a 'neutral' mediator for Belarus than an EU (and especially NATO) member state. Ukraine could also be a suitable venue for meetings between EU and US politicians and high-ranking Belarusian officials without violating the visa ban, should the list be expanded again in the future. Ukraine's current political crisis, however, largely inhibits its political ability to act as a mediator on the scene of international politics – a satisfactory resolution of this crisis seems to be a necessary pre-condition of fulfilling such a mediating role.

An EU Special Representative for Belarus

The European Union should pay much more attention to Belarus and keep it constantly on its political agenda. We think that the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Belarus would be of great importance, especially if the current positive steps of the Lukashenko administration are continued. This would not only signal the increased and continuous interest of the EU towards Belarus, but also offer a permanent channel for dialog with both the opposition and the government. A EUSR would also be able to coordinate different efforts much more effectively.

The visa ban list

Concerning the visa ban list, experience shows that despite the initial skepticism, the **visa ban list proved to be an effective bargaining tool** in negotiation with the Belarusian government. The EU's recent decision to reduce the visa ban list to only a handful of names drew much attention, and was a very clear signal to the Belarusian government of the willingness to improve relations.

However, it should be made clear for the Lukashenko administration that the **visa ban list is a flexible one – in both ways**. In the event of satisfactory cooperation it is possible to remove certain names, perhaps even some of the high-ranking ones. On the other hand, in a case of continued non-compliance, further names could be added, even hundreds of them, if necessary.

More concrete EU demands

Most experts agree that instead of the 12 general demands in the EU 'non-paper', a shorter, and – most importantly – more concrete list of demands should be prepared and should also be constantly updated. It could be not only more easily interpreted by both the government and the opposition, but could also support the further development of the abovementioned idea of a gradual and conditional approach.

The need for a detailed EU-Belarus Road Map can be logically derived from the necessity of the conditionality-based approach. Such a road map needs to contain a detailed list of steps expected to be done by the Lukashenko administration,

and the benefits from the side of the EU for fulfilling these demands in order to clearly set the guidelines of the future, intensifying engagement.

The EU-Belarus Road Map needs to be elaborated with the highest urgency, in order to provide a viable, concrete and convincing alternative for Belarus against the growing pressure of Russia. Besides the EU and national governments, experts communities and the NGO sector needs to get involved in the preparation of the road map, both from the EU Member States and from Belarus.

Support for democratic opposition

The Belarusian opposition is marginalized because of state repression of opposition activists and the systematic destruction of any oppositional structure, as well as of communication channels to the population. In addition to **external repression, internal mistakes** and weaknesses have further hindered the development of a strong opposition. The opposition has put in too much effort to reach out to its own followers in the opposition community and to the international community, while at the same time **losing contact with the population in general**, since too few efforts were made to communicate effectively with the people. Also the obvious - and understandable - dependency of many Belarusian opposition groups and parties on foreign donors has further alienated the parties from the local population. Moreover, this has accelerated internal conflicts and lowered the public image of party leaders and their rank and file members.

The Belarusian opposition has relied so much on foreign aid that they have not developed their own strength to withstand the repression, but instead pinned their hopes too much on foreign help. Albeit Western institutions and civil society play an important role in alleviating the harm and protecting oppositional activists, they do not (and cannot) prevent the **marginalization of the opposition**. To some extent, foreign aid has simply helped the opposition to accommodate itself in the marginal niche which Lukashenko has allowed for it.

Reaching out to the people

To strengthen the opposition in Belarus, the opposition must be enabled and encouraged to revitalize effective communication with the mass of the people reaching out beyond the small opposition circles. As the recent election campaign has shown, thousands of citizens are willing to sign for their candidates. The political base of the opposition can be strengthened and further developed once the opposition begins to work on the concrete needs of their electorate and engages itself in the multitude of small struggles of the citizens with state institutions. The EU should help the opposition to develop the necessary capacities and should encourage outreach to new groups of the citizenry. Opposition actors who are especially successful at connecting with the population (as can be seen from opinion polls) should be rewarded.

Networks instead of coalition

From the first coalition building exercise for the presidential elections in 2001, the political diversity within the Belarusian opposition has been put aside for the single overwhelming issue of democratization. Since then, the differences between many opposition parties are widely reduced to questions of (life)-style and party-history. Instead of 'forcing' the opposition into internal quarrels over leadership in artificial coalitions and instead of barring independent actors out of the coalition, as donors have sometimes done in the past, the EU (and the USA) should foster cooperation and networking between the different groups. This should also lead to an opening of the 'opposition block' towards new allies within broader Belarusian society.

Strengthen self-defense

While under pressure, the opposition and independent groups are not helpless against state repression. In many cases, rights defenders within Belarus can develop leverage since (a) Belarusian state institutions do not form a monolithic bloc, but are ridden by internal factions and power struggles that could be mobilized against each other. In addition to this, (b) Lukashenko's government reacts sensibly to shifts in the public mood, since major trends cannot be marginalized

as being 'just the usual opposition', and (c) the population has been taught to mistrust the state bureaucracy by Lukashenko himself who regularly dismisses his former co-workers and still tries to present himself as a fighter in the struggle against corruption.

The opposition needs, therefore, to develop much stronger capacities to defend their rights within the country and to involve the broad population in local struggles and issues. Human rights groups should be trained not just to monitor and report human rights offenses, but to become human rights defenders.

Unfortunately though, the EU until now has not systematically strengthened the work of human rights defenders within Belarus, and has instead relied mainly on external interventions through the channels of foreign diplomacy, which have proved to be utterly ineffective in influencing the regime.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) for 2007-2013 has put an emphasis on support for human rights defenders and should be regarded as a first step in the right direction, but the amount of support projected for Belarus up to now is absolutely insufficient, especially when compared to the amounts spent over the last years for, e.g. student programs.

Developing partnership between donors and opposition actors

The opposition in Belarus has to be supported and should not be left alone against the state apparatus, but the effects of the dependency of opposition groups and parties on foreign aid must be reduced. This does not mean that the level of support should be reduced. On the contrary: while increasing the support for the opposition their independence should also be increased. The EU donors and their intermediaries should, therefore, constrain their level of intervention and avoid direct involvement in political decisions and strategies. Outsiders, especially representatives of large state-financed programs, have to stay within the boundaries of facilitating democratic processes and should not become 'pure actors' in the internal democratic process.

The EU should make their support to opposition groups as transparent as possible, but without endangering the local partners who often have to protect themselves against prosecution from the Belarusian secret services and other 'law enforcement agencies'.

The EU has to publicly strengthen its measures against fraud and mismanagement of political aid. Not because this is taking place on a larger scale, but because the opposition is constantly blamed for it. In-country capacities for the monitor-

ing of projects, in particular, have to be increased in order to catch misconduct early and efficiently before public damage have been done. Thereby the assessment of impact should play a greater role than in the past, even as it is understood that the political risks in Belarus are immense.

Bringing the opposition, society, and the government to the negotiation table

As was stated before, negotiations with the government must be organized together with the opposition, civil society, and – if possible – entrepreneurs as well as mid-level professional officials. Rounds of negotiations must, therefore, not only involve foreign delegations, but should also include public participation. While the official focus of public roundtables, creative contests, future conferences, Open Spaces etc. would be the participation of society, the opposition must be ‘naturally’ taken along and allowed to participate too.

The negative outcome of the elections does not change the general importance of participating and demonstrating the country-wide presence of the democratic opposition. After the parliamentary elections ended with the general defeat of the democratic opposition candidates, the next strategic objective is to start preparing for the next local and presidential elections, both scheduled to take place in 2011. At the same time, the training and education programs aimed at Belarusian youth need to be continued and strengthened. Because younger generations always have a more open mindset than their predecessors, demography indeed works for democracy.

Support for civil society

The support given by Western NGOs and other organizations plays a crucial role in preserving Belarusian civil society, despite the restrictive policies of the government. However, in order to not only maintain the existing contacts and organizations, but to further develop Belarusian civil society, certain modifications should be considered.

First, the overall **grant policy of the European Union needs to incorporate more flexibility and to reduce bureaucracy.** In the current state the necessary

administration far exceeds the capability of many Belarusian civil organizations, not to mention the long period between submitting an application and actually receiving the grant. Another issue is that, in many cases, NGOs can apply only for the reimbursement of money they've already spent. Such a system is not suitable for newly founded organizations, and especially not for non-registered ones.

Another related problem is that EU grants can be given by definition only to registered organizations possessing legal entity – something quite hard to achieve in Belarus. The new EU calls for proposals under which **organizations registered outside Belarus are eligible**, are good examples for a more effective and flexible approach, but are still not sufficient.

In addition to maintaining support for the 'traditional' opposition organizations, more attention should be paid to **informal groups on the grassroots level**. In many cases they possess real action potential (especially on local levels), have active and devoted members, and are young, agile, and creative. The practically impossible acquisition of registered legal status should not deprive them of receiving EU funding.

Funding should be continued because in most cases European support has a cyclical nature: it is provided in the run-up to and after the elections or if atrocities have happened. A solid base funding that continuously flows would be most welcome. In many cases long term programs with a 3-5 year perspective are required, which then should be assessed regularly so that the money flow can be directly reduced if a strategy does not bear results (or increased, if opportunities arise).

Another almost neglected group consists of the **trade unions, which need more attention and support**. The GSP preferences were suspended in June 2007 in connection with Belarusian non-compliance with the ILO recommendation concerning the rights of the trade unions. Therefore, the trade unions have a strong external supporter behind them, namely the ILO. If liberalization of the operating conditions of the trade unions could be achieved, along with the re-granting of GSP preferences, this would have an additional effect on the overall democratization process by its positive spill-over into the non-governmental sphere.

Therefore, in the long run, a more flexible policy of civil society support should be elaborated. As long as no such policy exists, **the role of intermediaries should be increased in supporting Belarusian civil society**. EU funds should be given to those European organizations (both national and international ones) which already have significant experience and routine in working with the Belarusian civic sphere. These intermediary organizations could then channel EU funds to Belarus more effectively by using their own more flexible financial rules. Obvi-

ously, maximum accountability of the intermediary organizations has to be ensured. The experience of the CEE countries is an important contribution to the improvement of the funding process.

It is also essential to be able to offer financial support to political parties. While donors have good reasons not to support political parties, it must be understood that there is no democracy without an effective multi-party system and –under the current circumstances – supporting the creation and development of political parties is as important as support for civil society. Continuity of funding is especially important in this case, although in the periods before elections additional financial support is still needed.

So far, unfortunately, Western engagement in transforming the sphere of **education** in Belarus has had little success. In the meantime, authorities have established full ideological control over the educational system. Students and teachers find themselves under constant pressure and harassment. Belarus remains the only country in Europe not participating in the Bologna process. The European Humanities University, established in Minsk in 1992 to promote values of Western civilization, was accused of active international cooperation and brutally closed in 2004.

Bringing non-censored information to Belarus

One of the main elements of the still existing popularity of the Lukashenko government is the almost **complete governmental control over the Belarusian media**. All television channels and radio broadcasts are under state control, while most of the independent journals and newspapers have either been shut down, or their journalists have been harassed or arrested. Interestingly enough, due to the availability of Russian channels and the large number of satellite receivers owned by households, information on the world is accessible from many sources. **What is missing is information on Belarus** – in this field the government exercises complete control.

The newly approved presidential bill of June 24, 2008 throws the state of the Belarusian media back to Soviet times by cracking down on internet journalism in Belarus and forbidding Belarusian media to accept foreign funding. By requiring registration for all Belarusian internet sites and making it possible to persecute journalists for ‘discrediting Belarus’, the informational hunger of Belarus towards sources of media coming from inside of Belarus will significantly increase.

Therefore it is of great importance to break the information monopoly of the regime, and to deliver independent, non-censored information to the Belarusian people. This would be the most effective way of supporting the pro-European part of their identity in order to bring them closer to Europe.

There have been numerous efforts to launch independent media channels to provide an alternative to the state-monopolized information services. However, the **coordination among Western alternative media channels needs to be improved**. Currently some of these channels are competing rather than cooperating, especially concerning broadcast hours, frequency distribution, etc. In addition to this, they are competing basically for the same national and EU-level financial resources, what also hinders efficiency. Another area to be improved is their **broadcast range inside the country**, so that more people could be reached by the broadcasts.

Besides better coordination of Western alternative media channels, **more emphasis should be put on the support of electronic, internet-based media**. In Belarus, the rate of internet access is surprisingly high and is dynamically growing: currently, it is on par with that of Austria. Experience shows that the internet is not only a way of providing information, but it can also function as a mobilization and activation tool.

Setting up a well-functioning network of Western alternative media channels would be the most effective way to **convince ordinary Belarusian people of the long-term positive effect of democratic transition**. A credible alternative needs to be provided to the undoubtedly existing and clearly foreseeable short-term hindrances, which tend to be emphasized by official communications in order to maintain the overall apathy and skepticism of the people.

While the coordination of the Western media seems to be most urgent, it must not be overlooked that within the country independent print and internet media still exist, which need support and protection. Besides this, the state media should be targeted with programs to encourage the professional development and exchange of journalists, as well as a more balanced coverage of the EU and democratic processes in other countries.

Improving the human rights situation

According to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, the deterioration of human rights in Belarus has been dramatic due to the rejection of pluralism in all sectors of society, the denial of civil rights, and repression of political freedoms.

It has to be made clear to the Lukashenko regime that **improving the human rights situation in Belarus is a prerequisite** of getting any significant benefits from the EU. However, instead of always **only promising general ‘benefits’, more concrete promises** are needed from the EU.

First and foremost, although the regime has released all political prisoners, **the immediate ending of politically motivated trials** should be demanded. In addition, the government of Belarus must put **an end to all arbitrary detentions**, including the less visible cases in smaller cities, mostly against low-level opposition activists.

If a **moratorium on the death penalty** were introduced in Belarus, an important obstacle to Belarusian **membership in the Council of Europe** would be removed, as currently Belarus is the only European country which is not a member of the organization. However, it has to be kept in mind that CoE membership has numerous other requirements besides the abolition of the death penalty – thus no irresponsible promises on an easy Belarusian accession should be made.

In addition to these, the **immediate cessation of harassment of both opposition movements and individuals** should be demanded. The regime has to realize that actions taken against even low-level opposition activists in the countryside will not remain unnoticed, and that such moves could result in a serious delay of any support offered by the EU. In order to achieve that, more EU effort should be taken to provide these cases with more publicity, e.g. through embassies in Belarus. Publicizing can sometimes be more effective than high-level, narrow-focused political demands. This would also give an image of coherence to the EU’s policy towards Belarus.

Respect for Human Rights in Europe means today also **respect for national minorities and their right to self-organization and participation in public life**. European standards on national minorities, deriving from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 27), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, two Council of Europe treaties (the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and the OSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 have to

be observed and implemented in practice. The last years **have witnessed many examples of various repressions towards national minority organizations**, including efforts to influence the outcome of elections and the structure and representation of national minority organizations. **This remains an important dividing factor in relations with some EU neighbors of Belarus.** Thus, the Belarusian administration has had to cease its efforts to interfere with the activities of independent organizations of national minorities; in fact the role of a public administration –in Belarus - should be support for minorities in strengthening their rights stemming from the above mentioned legal acts and other European standards and regulations. **The progress on these issues should be closely observed by EU institutions**, since respect for minority rights remains one of the most important principles of an integrated Europe. As argued above, special emphasis should be placed on capacity-building for Belarusian human rights defenders.

Broader economic cooperation

It is well known that the Lukashenko government faces serious economic hardships, mostly due to increasing Russian energy prices and their related consequences. In order to counter-balance these negative effects, Belarus is trying to make a gradual economic opening towards the West, though still is not conducting any significant political reforms.

Belarus has some reason for being optimistic about this effort, as **there is already a significant presence of European companies in the country**, which remains mostly unnoticed both by the Western political and scientific spheres. However, their presence in Belarus already represents a certain localization tendency, as they want to have their interests represented and protected. The government responds to these demands, which was clearly shown by the recent abolition of the 'golden share rule', a law which permitted the government to take over the control of any companies in which the state had even the smallest share. Increased protection for private investment in the form of internal legislation and international treaties should also be encouraged.

Even so, the existing European business involvement in Belarus should be explored and analyzed by researchers in order to have a deeper analysis and a better estimation on the chance of success for Lukashenko's efforts at an economic

opening. The West could also **lean on the European business presence in Belarus as a possible driver for future change.**

Therefore, **further European business involvement in Belarus should be encouraged.** In addition to the abovementioned motivations, there is another important reason for this. Namely, since the Lukashenko government desperately needs foreign capital, the alternative of getting it from Europe is to attract further Russian (or possibly Chinese) investors.

There are also a number of programs on cross-border cooperation which do already facilitate economic ties to the West, mostly to the Baltic States and Poland. These programs contribute to the socio-economic development of the region by supporting small businesses, improving transport infrastructure, and protecting the common cultural and environmental heritage. Many of them are also designed to improve the human rights situation in Belarus, such as the UN programs for combating trafficking in drugs and human beings.

All in all, we have to realize that preventing the economic collapse of Belarus is of essential importance for Europe. Protecting the existing European business interests is only part of the problem. Of similar importance is the increasing Russian economic influence, which does not facilitate the economic reforms that are so important for providing a background for a democratic transition and the economic cooperation between the EU and Belarus. **Therefore, assisting the preservation of the economic stability of Belarus is a crucial Western interest.** In order to achieve this state, significant economic reforms need to be made – the commitment of the EU will provide important motivation to the authorities.

The main problem areas which need to undergo reforms are strongly related both to the state and the economic sector, e.g., fighting corruption, lowering the cost of doing business, and increasing investor protection would all result in a better economic environment. However, the most important issue remains the high volume of foreign debt, which could subject the country to swings in financial markets and lead to economic collapse.

A smart visa policy

The bureaucratic complications and expenses related to the acquisition of EU visas have long been a concern for the Belarusian people. The introduction of the Schengen visa system in all three countries neighboring Belarus from the West – i.e., Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – has made the situation worse. **The 60 EUR**

price of a single entry visa equals approximately one-third of the average monthly salary in Belarus. In addition to this, the process itself has become even more complicated and time-consuming.

Moreover, the introduction of the Schengen system almost immediately induced the 'black market trade' of Schengen visas and **more people have turned to organized crime groups** in order to get 'smuggled' into the EU.

The European Union should consider the development of a **new, smart** – more flexible, more demand-oriented – **visa policy for Belarus**, which would allow ordinary Belarusian citizens to work, study, and travel in the European Union, thus contributing to the overall improvement of the EU's image in Belarus and help to not alienate them from Europe any further. At the same time, thanks to its flexibility, a smart visa policy could remain an effective political leverage tool towards members of the government.

A smart visa policy should contain the following elements:

- **Visa fees for Belarusian people should be decreased** generally. In the long run, even an **EU-Belarus visa facilitation agreement** could be offered, provided that the Belarusian government fulfils certain requirements set by the EU. Until then, unilateral steps from the EU could achieve important results as well.
- **More exceptions need to be allowed.** A reasonable selection criterion could be the purpose of the visit: for students, scientific delegations and exchange programs, decreased visa fees should be introduced. In certain well-grounded cases, even granting free visas could be considered. Another option is to introduce an age-based simplification, for example for people below 25 and over 60 years, the visa price could be decreased.
- The institution of the so-called '**national visa**' **should be used more frequently**, especially in the case of those people who need to visit the given country regularly and for a relatively long time.

The example of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements with the Western Balkan Countries, within the framework of which the visa fee was lowered to 35 EUR, some groups of applicants were granted free of charge admission, visa procedures were simplified, shows how Serbian people, for instance, benefited from a similar situation.

In order to shorten the time necessary for acquiring a Schengen visa, the EU member states should consider **increasing the number of consular personnel**, i.e., local workforce contracted for consular jobs, working at their embassies and consulates. Such a step would not diminish the overall security of the Schengen system, and it would result in much faster administration.

Transatlantic cooperation

Due to its more unified policy-making structures, **the United States is capable of a much more effective use of sanctions and various punitive measures than the European Union.** The recent steps of Washington putting all Belarusian oil companies under sanctions and flexibly reacting to positive changes by easing them perfectly illustrates this action potential. **The release of political prisoners shows that sanctions, if applied intelligently, can bring serious results.**

As was stated before, the current macroeconomic situation of Belarus does not allow the Lukashenko administration to further spoil its relations with *both* the US and the EU. Improving Western economic ties is a must for the government, and foreign trade incomes need to be increased. Taking into account this desire of the government and the recent measures of the US, the EU has been able to improve its negotiating potential by **emphasizing its own flexibility, readiness for negotiations, and its more positive approach towards Belarus,** to credibly complement US sanctions and to counterbalance Russian influence as well.

Obviously such a policy needs to be conducted in a coordinated way, e.g., not *against* the intentions of Washington, but by *acting together*, keeping the same objectives in mind, and using different, yet **complementary** methods. For example, further sanctions introduced by Washington could be complemented by further cooperation offers from the side of the EU – delivered together with further demands. Belarus is not strong enough anymore to reject or resist both offers, as the third pole – Russia – is not a viable option as long as the Lukashenko administration intends to decrease its dependency on Moscow. In such a way, Belarus will be more responsive to the European offer – and hopefully fulfill demands which are in the interest of both the EU and the US.

The strategic goals of the US and the EU to be achieved, e.g., having a stable, democratic Belarus, are the same, and an even more coordinated transatlantic approach can be all the more useful in achieving them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

Dialog with Minsk applying a gradual and conditional approach

Engagement with the regime is necessary for achieving change in Belarus. The effectiveness of negotiations could be raised by involving Ukraine as a mediator. Conditionality should be observed at all steps of the negotiating process, using tools such as a flexible visa ban list.

Appointment of an EU Special Representative for Belarus

The European Union should pay much more attention to Belarus and keep it constantly on its political agenda. The appointment of a EUSR for Belarus would be of great importance. This would not only signal the increased and continuous interest of the EU towards Belarus, but it would also offer a permanent channel for dialog with both the opposition and the government. A EUSR would also be able to coordinate different efforts much more effectively.

Support for the democratic opposition

In order to overcome the marginalization of the opposition, the outreach to the broader public and a stronger involvement of the society in opposition struggles and vice versa should be encouraged. More diversity in between presidential election campaigns and a reduction in dependency on international donors shall empower the opposition to form a broader political base.

Support for civil society

In the long run, a more flexible civil society support policy should be applied, the coordination among donors should be improved, and experienced intermediaries on the national and international level should get an increased role. Adapting experience from organizations of Central- and Eastern Europe would facilitate this process. Coordinated efforts of EU member states and foundations should be undertaken to support activities of the European Humanities University currently located in Vilnius, Lithuania, which remains the only Belarusian university providing free education for the young generation of students of Belarus.

Bring non-censored information to Belarus

The coordination among the already existing media needs to be improved, as well as their range inside the country. Support of electronic, internet-based media should be increased as well.

Improvement of the human rights situation

Parallel to demands of improving the overall human rights situation in Belarus – and with special regard to the situation of the opposition, more publicity should follow the events in Belarus and local rights defenders must be supported.

Encouraging Western economic involvement

Realizing that the economic stability of Belarus is also in the interest of the EU, further economic involvement of European business should be encouraged. The analysis and exploration of existing economic ties between Belarus and the EU should serve as a first step for more involvement in the future.

Smart visa policy

- A general reduction of visa fees, consideration of offering an EU-Belarus visa facilitation agreement.
- Allowance of more exceptions to the visa fees.
- More frequent use of the so-called 'national visa'.
- Increasing the number of consular personnel.

Improvement of transatlantic cooperation

Harmonizing the different approaches of the United States and the European Union towards Belarus would lead to a result much more effectively. The EU should realize and play upon its special position and possibilities, and this – in parallel to the stricter Belarus policy of the US – would properly serve the common transatlantic goal.

AUTHORS

Authors

Chairman of the Belarus Task Force

Aleksander Kwasniewski, former President of Poland

Members of the Belarus Task Force

Nadia Arbatova, Russia, Russian Academy of Sciences

Emil Constantinescu, Romania, former President

Pavol Demes, Slovakia, German Marshall Fund of the US

István Gyarmati, Hungary, President and CEO, ICDT

Milan Kucan, Slovenia, former President

Sonja Licht, Serbia, former Chair, Task Force for the Future of SFRY

Janos Martonyi, Hungary, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

Janne Haaland Matlary, Norway, former State Secretary for Foreign Affairs

Markus Meckel, Germany, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (GDR)

Nadezhda Mihaylova, Bulgaria, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

Anatoly Mikhailov, Belarus, Rector of the European Humanities University

Marianne Mikko, Estonia, Member of the European Parliament

Janusz Onyszkiewicz, Poland, Vice-President of the European Parliament's
Foreign Affairs Committee

Boris Tarasyuk, Ukraine, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

Antanas Valionis, Lithuania, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

Other Authors

Ireneusz Bil, Poland, Director, Foundation Amicus Europae

Peter Kolossa, Hungary, Director for Programs and Development, ICDT

Björn Kunter, Germany, Federation for Social Defense

András Rácz, Hungary, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs

Due to its internal domestic political circumstances, Belarus has been excluded from various European institutions and international organizations and has become an isolated quasi-pariah state. Belarus has become Europe's forgotten country, a nation which is left out of the universally beneficial process of cooperation in an increasingly prosperous and integrated Europe.

More recently, however, there is a significant increase of willingness for cooperation on the side of both the government in Minsk and Western governments. In late 2007, the Belarus Task Force was formed to help further this process with a thorough analysis of the situation and some specific recommendations. This report contains a summary of the group's views and analysis.

The International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT) is a non-profit organization based in Budapest, which collects the experiences of past democratic transitions and shares them with those who are determined to follow that path. Instead of promoting democracy in general, the ICDT sets more concrete and pragmatic goals, concentrating on democratic transition as a process. The Centre strives to show how dozens of young democracies have made and are making the transition, so that those who set off on this difficult journey from dictatorship to democracy in the future may learn from the successes as well as the failures.



International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT)
1022 Budapest, Árvácska utca 12
Phone: +36 (1) 438 0820 • Fax: +36 (1) 438 0821
E-mail: info@icdt.hu • Website: <http://www.icdt.hu>