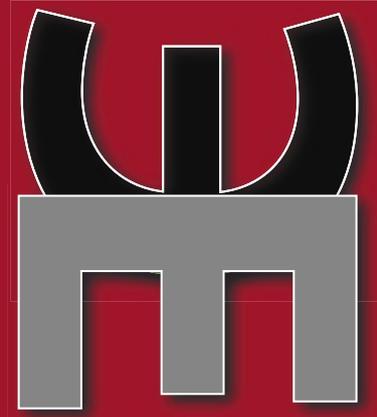




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UROPEAN CHOICE FOR **BELARUS**

Effective Policy towards Belarus A Challenge for the enlarged EU

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1. Justification

The specific position of Belarus in Europe

Belarus is the last remaining dictatorship in Europe in which basic European values, such as democracy, human rights and the freedom of the media, are repeatedly violated. This isolation is further entrenched by a lack of communication and co-operation with the EU: Belarus is the only Eastern European country that does not have a PCA (Partnership and Co-operation Agreement) with the EU; it is the only European country that doesn't belong to the Council of Europe. Yet the importance of dealing with the issue of Belarus is now starkly apparent. Belarus is one of the few countries bordering the EU to the East after its enlargement in 2004, with more than 1000km of shared borderland, and three member countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) as its neighbours. Furthermore, Belarus is an important transit country for Russian gas and crude oil on its way to the EU.

In the future, we can expect to witness new repressions by Europe's last dictator and further deterioration of the situation in the coming months. Lukashenko will do everything in his power to oppress the political opposition, NGOs and the media in order to ensure the extension of his rule following the presidential elections scheduled for autumn 2006. The first step towards this was taken during the falsified referendum in October 2004 in which Lukashenko illegally extended his term of presidency. A Lukashenko presidency after 2006 will mean the conservation and intensification of his rule and the establishment of a strong and dangerous dictatorship along EU borders.

There are contradictory opinions concerning the situation in Belarus. On one hand, both the US and the EU condemned the Belarusian referendum and the elections in autumn 2004, whilst the Russian position was one of acceptance. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the referendum transparent and stated that it reflected the will of the Belarusian people - yet another example of Russia's lack of interest in the democratization of Belarus.

As experience from previous years has shown, co-operation with Lukashenko's regime is and will be, for the foreseeable future, impossible. Despite the EU's repeated declarations of their desire for a democratic Belarus, EU policy has failed. Consequently, the EU must be prepared to employ new tactics and to co-operate directly with non-governmental actors, who are frequently illegal in Belarus. The non-state sector should now become the main partner of the EU and the main beneficiary of EU money (rather than the state which at present receives the majority of resources).

Politicians, experts and journalists in the EU very often identify Lukashenko's anti-western and pro-Russian official policy with the opinions of Belarusian society. The reality, however, is different. Despite anti-western, anti-European official propaganda, more than 50 percent of Belarusians support close co-operation with the EU {whilst simultaneously, more than 50 percent are also in favour of closer relations with Russia}. Closer relations with Europe, perhaps even the integration of Belarus into the EU, should remain an open question due to the support evident for such policy in a large part of Belarusian society.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine showed that democracy can be built in eastern European countries by social movements and that the new Ukrainian authorities are interested in European integration. A similar phenomenon can happen in Belarus; and the new Belarusian authorities could follow the path of the Ukraine. The EU should be prepared for this situation.

2. Two strategies of EU Policy towards Belarus

The EU must formulate new policy towards Belarus as previous policy has been completely ineffective. The EU has to openly declare that the promotion of democracy and the gradual integration of Belarus into Europe are its priorities in EU neighbourhood policy. The EU should not only react to the current political situation in Belarus, but also elaborate its own strategy aimed at the democratization of the country. Such actions must be carried out with speed due to threatening political time frame in Belarus. The two strategies the EU requires towards Belarus are as follows:

- A short-term strategy until the presidential elections in 2006
- A medium and long-term strategy consisting mainly of support in the building of civil society.

Rather than contradictory, these two strategies are compatible and complementary and should both be initiated this year. This paper is focused on the short-term strategy.

3. Short-term Strategy

General Recommendations

The European Union should focus on the most important problem from a political point of view, namely the possibility of Lukashenko's third term. The European Council should state that a third term is unacceptable according to European values, following European Parliament resolution no P6_TA(2004)0045 from October 28 2004. The EU should maintain a very clear position and be willing to communicate it to the Belarusian authorities in the event of possible future murders, disappearances and instances of further repression. This policy must be implemented with a clear distinction: that action is being taken against Lukashenko's regime rather than against the country or Belarusian society.

Better co-operation must be developed and a common position forced concerning Belarus by the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and EU member states. The neighbours of Belarus, the CEE-Visegrad group and other EU member states (for example Germany and the Scandinavian countries) must develop relationships of co-operation so as to build a broader coalition within the EU with a potential synergy effect. There must be a greater level of coordination between the EU and the United States. EU policy towards Belarus could be coordinated with US policy towards Minsk (Belarus Democracy Act) as both actors have as their final goal the democratization of Belarus. Ukrainian authorities

and civil society should be involved in the Belarus issue as Ukrainian experiences are more valuable for Belarus than the experiences of other post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004. The EU should discuss the issue of Belarus with Russia but cannot negotiate EU policy toward Belarus with Moscow as, unfortunately, Russia has no interest in changing either the situation or the regime. In the framework of the EU-Russia dialogue, the EU could call on Russia to not allow Moscow to support the Lukashenko regime.

Concrete actions

These recommendations include both activities against Lukashenko's regime and proposals for action within the EU itself concerning Belarus.

- On 13 December 2004, the Council extended a visa ban given to two high officials that were responsible for the illegal referendum and parliamentary elections. Although an impressive initial step, such visa restrictions should not be limited to a small number of top level officials. Rather, the threat of appearing on a visa-ban list should be both real and possible for every official, police officer, judge or others who actively participate in the oppression of NGOs, political parties, the media and students or who took part in the falsification of the October elections. Conversely, the EU should rethink possibilities for the liberalization of the visa regime for ordinary Belarusian citizens, especially young people and students. This could take the form of lower visa prices as proof of EU desire for good relations with Belarus.
- Specific economic sanctions should be established against Lukashenko's regime. The EU should identify the bank accounts of Lukashenko, high officials and those companies which are part of the illegal arms export. The EU and its member states could also identify and block the weapons export from Belarus as this is one of the main sources of income for the regime.
- The EU must focus on those schemes that promote the activity of Belarusian society, the consolidation of opposition forces and the building of pro-European attitudes. Social atomization and apathy that is promoted by the regime could be combated by promoting a free media and supporting intellectual and civic life in Belarus.
- The EU Commission should create a special task force responsible for planning mass media support in or for Belarus in the first half of 2005. The task force should present proposals within two or three months. Subsequently, the EU should implement such projects that support the Belarusian media, in particular electronic media broadcasting from abroad, in the second half of 2005.
- A similar task force should be established in order to source methods with which to financially support delegalized independent NGOs and initiatives.
- A third task force should find a way to open European exchange programs to Belarusian students independently of both the Belarusian government and the school administrations, which operate as part of the repressive regime apparatus.

- The EU should prepare a unilateral proposal for the EU-Belarus Action Plan by the Commission. This is vital as the EU should be prepared for immediate negotiation with the new government in Minsk following the end of the Lukashenko era. Furthermore, a draft of the Action Plan could act as a signal to the Belarusian opposition and society that the EU is developing consistent policy towards Belarus and that it wants to propose concrete proposals for future EU-Belarus relations. Guidelines of the draft of the Action Plan could be published in the second half of 2005.
- The Commission should establish its direct representation in Belarus.
- EU member countries' embassies in Minsk (for instance, Visegrad countries) should develop common pro-European activities, for example the preparation of European days in Minsk and other Belarusian cities or the establishment of an Info Centre in Minsk.
- A Special EU Representative for Belarus should be chosen, preferably a well-known figure, such as a former politician. The Special EU Representative would inform EU institutions of the current situation in Belarus, of EU-Belarus relations, and would propose action to be undertaken by the EU towards Belarus. Moreover, he or she would make and maintain contact with representatives of Belarusian civil society, opposition forces and authorities.
- As already proposed, the EU could establish the 'European Democracy Fund' (EDF), which would act not only in the case of Belarus, but also in other countries with non-democratic regimes. Such an institution could act without the agreement of the given country, which is especially important in Belarus as the Belarusian authorities do not accept programs that support the opposition or civil society. The EDF could support the above mentioned activities (media, the promotion of civil society) and could be sponsored by the EU budget. Furthermore, the EDF would be an independent institution within the EU and would provide relief if other EU assistance programmes could not, due to political circumstances or EU regulations.