

2009 Strategy Paper

2009 Situation Analysis and Policy Recommendations

Introduction

In October of 2008, the European Union changed its strategy towards Belarus – “Europe’s last dictatorship” – from a policy of isolation to an offer of dialogue with the leadership in Minsk. Though the shift was preceded by the release of political prisoners, it also closely followed parliamentary elections that were described by the OSCE as neither fair nor free, the conduct of which had been the subject of a condition for a policy of dialogue. Due to the absence of public debate on the politics in Europe, this shift in strategy met with incomprehension among large portions of the political opposition in Belarus, which perceived it as a betrayal of the democratic values of the European Union. In the months that followed, Belarusian responses to EU calls for the opening up of political life there were moderate at best and involved little of substance; still, in May of 2009 the country was invited to take part in the EU’s new Eastern Partnership programme along with five other former Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine). In view of this, the active involvement of the civil societies of Belarus and the other Eastern European countries in cooperation within the Eastern Partnership takes on great political and psychological significance.

The Eastern Partnership will include a “Civil Society Forum”. Following a pre-forum conference on 5/6 May, 2009, the forum is scheduled to meet for the first time in Brussels in November of 2009. The Civil Society Forum represents an acknowledgement by the EU of the importance of active civil societies for the process of rapprochement and a response to civil society demands for greater involvement. What remains unclear is how the Civil Society Forum will actually be structured and what role it is to play within the Eastern Partnership.

Analysis of the situation in Belarus

The change in EU strategy, from a policy of isolation to one of dialogue with Minsk, played out against the backdrop of altered relations with Russia, which had been Belarus’ closest ally and with which it is bound by a union treaty.

The gas war in late 2006 / early 2007 marked the publicly visible beginning of the cooling in that relationship. Russia forced through a gradual elimination of its energy price subsidies for Belarus, creating pressure on what had, up to then, been the relatively stable economy of its neighbouring country. The international financial and economic crisis has caused a severe decline in the economic situation there since mid 2008, due to the almost exclusive orientation of Belarus’ exports towards the drastically shrinking Russian market. At times, the total volume of Belarusian exports sunk by 50% compared to levels from the previous year; since then currency reserves have been consumed at a very rapid rate. In this situation, Belarus was forced to take on additional foreign debt, coming primarily from Russia and the International Monetary Fund. However, the loans and the budget cuts the government made will be unable to do more than temporarily delay the serious problems on the horizon.

The Georgian War in August 2008 made clear the extent to which Russia is determined to defend its interests and supremacy within the Commonwealth of Independent States, through the use of military force if necessary – in accordance with the five foreign policy principles laid down by Russia's President Medvedev. Belarus saw a challenge to its own independence in Russia's actions – as did other successor states of the Soviet Union – and, despite enormous pressure to do so, did not follow Moscow's lead in recognizing the Georgian provinces as independent countries. In the wake of that omission came verbal attacks on both sides, trade conflicts and the denial of the final portion of a Russian loan that had previously been approved.

By its actions in recent years, Russia has gone from being the guarantor of Belarusian independence to representing a serious risk to it. In these circumstances, Belarus is seeking closer ties with the European Union, hoping that more intense economic cooperation with the EU will enable it to attain greater independence from Russia. However, Belarus' strong structural and economic ties with Russia make a fundamental re-orientation towards the EU all but impossible in the short or middle-term. The Belarusian policy of opening up to the West can therefore only be understood as relating to a "see-saw policy" intended to create the greatest possible scope for free action with respect to both the East and the West.

In view of this new strategic situation in Europe, the decision to include Belarus in the European Union's Eastern Partnership can be assessed as strategically correct. Cooperation in the Eastern Partnership platforms and initiatives – in border security, energy security, and the creation of common standards, economic areas and association agreements – can encourage progress in the processes of democratic transformation and reform in these six successor states of the Soviet Union. However, if it is to do so, the implementation of the Eastern Partnership must be sustainable, substantial and well-funded, for which the active engagement of the European member states is indispensable. Involvement of the civil society is of primary importance in order to lend the process of democratic transformation sufficient weight relative to issues of the economy, environment, energy, stability and security within the rapprochement process.

Europe's Belarus policy continues to face a considerable problem that is posed by the absence of a visa facilitation agreement, as international exchange, particularly for the younger generation, is unnecessarily burdened by restrictive visa issue practices and high fees. This also disadvantages Belarus relative to its neighbouring countries, all of which have such agreements in place. The European Union continues to follow the questionable approach of using the prospect of visa facilitation as an incentive for the development of political relations and by doing so, is holding the population liable for the actions of the authoritarian government.

Policy recommendations

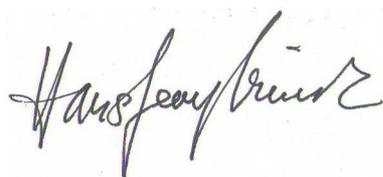
The association Menschenrechte in Belarus [Human Rights in Belarus] recommends the following for the European policy towards Belarus:

- immediately launching negotiations for a visa facilitation agreement independently of developments in political relations;
- focussing particular attention within the thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership on the following issues: legislation governing the media, registration procedures for

non-governmental organizations and parties, the rule of law and political abuse of the judicial system;

- providing access for civil society organizations to all thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership and, where appropriate, enabling them provide input;
- considering naming an EU Special Representative to coordinate cooperation with the civil society in Belarus in view of the special political situation;
- arranging cooperation with the civil society in Belarus under the Eastern Partnership programme independently of approval from the Belarusian government;
- supporting systematic election monitoring performed by local organizations in the years to come;
- promoting youth exchange for political and occupational education through the creation of exchange programmes;
- examining political developments inside and outside of Belarus, for instance, through regularly held Belarus conferences.

Berlin, October 2009



Dr. Hans-Georg Wieck
Chair



Stefanie Schiffer
Vice-chair



Christoph Becker
Vice-chair