

On the Future OF EUROPE

Policy Papers 4

The Forgotten Neighbour – Belarus
in the Context of EU Enlargement to the East

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Introduction

The present report is the fourth of a series of planned Policy Papers, which will present the views of Polish non-governmental communities concerning those international issues that are important from the point of view of European integration.

This project was initiated by the Stefan Batory Foundation. We invite various non-government organisations to co-operate on successive reports.

This text, which we have the pleasure to present to you, was prepared in co-operation with the East European Democratic Center – IDEE.

In the work on this Policy Paper also independent experts have participated. We thank all those persons who have contributed to the drafting of this paper for their kind assistance and valuable comments.

By using the formula of short policy papers, we wish to discuss in a comprehensible manner for the Western reader on matters that are important for the future of Europe, and also to contribute to the animation of the debate on this subject in Poland. We do not wish to limit ourselves to the presentation of the point of view of Poland and Poland's interests alone. It is our ambition that our proposals should take into account the general European perspective and provide a true contribution to the debate on the desirable shape of the external policy of the European Union.

We believe that an important role may be played in this discussion by the non-governmental organisations. They are not constrained by the numerous limitations resulting from the requirements of current politics and negotiations with the Union. It also seems that the opinions of Polish non-government communities might be found interesting, as we surely have a different way of looking at many issues than the present members of the European Union.

We have the pleasure to invite you to read and discuss these papers.

Stefan Batory Foundation

Belarus is a neighbour of three countries – Latvia, Lithuania, Poland – which in a few years should find themselves in the enlarged European Union. Relations with that country, numbering over 10 million inhabitants, will be one of the important issues of EU external policy, similarly as the relations with the Ukraine or dialogue with Russia concerning the Kaliningrad Oblast'. The European Union, both on the level of the European Commission and of the individual member countries, seems not to be fully aware of this fact as yet.

The reasons behind the lack of interest in Belarus on the part of the EU are various. Certainly one of them is that for the present members of the Union that state is a „distant country”, with which no one borders. Another very significant factor is the widespread belief that Belarus is basically a part of Russia, which is proven by the agreements on their integration signed by the two states since the mid nineteen-nineties. But probably the most important cause of Belarus being ignored is the lack of a concept of policy orientation toward that country. The European Union has so far been helpless with regard to the undemocratic activities of the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. All the above mentioned reasons have contributed to the situation, whereby the EU has not found it opportune to develop any common strategy with respect to Belarus, analogous to the documents on Russia and Ukraine. Not only the EU has a dilemma what to do about Belarus. Difficulties with the conduct of a policy with respect to that country are also visible in the case of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These countries devote much more attention to it, however, than the Union.

In order to understand the situation prevailing in Belarus it is necessary to examine the Belarusian society and the political elite of that country. Therefore, the first part of this paper is devoted exactly to these issues. The resulting conclusions will enable to formulate the recommendations, which constitute the second part of this paper. ■

I. Social and Political Situation in Belarus

1. Society

The society of Belarus is strongly divided in its opinions concerning all of the important issues of public life. The division lines sometimes run parallel to differences between generations, sometimes however they reflect the availability of access to alternative sources of information and the level of education of the given community. The distinction between the parts of society originating from the East and the West of the country also remains vivid. It is especially reflected in political attitudes.

The world outlook and the value system of the young generation, the consciousness of which was shaped in the period of disintegration of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Belarus state is remarkably different from that presented by the elderly and middle-aged people. A generation has already grown up, which has not been acquainted with any other motherland than independent Belarus, which emerged as a result of the collapse of the USSR in 1991. It is currently difficult to find young Belarusians who would think with nostalgia about the nonexistent Soviet Union. Such attitudes, however, are rather widespread among the middle aged and elderly generations. This is not to say that young people generally identify themselves with the opposition. Society at large generally does not trust the political class. This scepticism is particularly manifest among the younger generations.

The fairly high level of education, access to the internet and the increasing mobility of Belarusian youth, allow them to compare the ethical attitudes and quality of thought of their own political class with similar values represented by European politicians. The young generation has already drifted way beyond the soviet world, whereas the politicians, even those in opposition, are still strongly rooted in the past. Even when presenting extremely anti-communist attitudes, they apply notions and visions of politics and society that are characteristic of the soviet political elite.

The pro-Russian orientation of the regime of Mr Lukashenko is not in contradiction with the expectations of Belarusian society. This results, above all, from the family connections of the citizens of Belarus, 30% of whom have close relatives in Russia. Many Belarusians have been educated at Russian universities or have started their political and professional careers there. Together with Russians they have served in the soviet army. These factors create a specific system of ties with the citizens of Russia, which no politician aspiring to leading positions in Minsk can afford to ignore.

This does not mean, however, that the policy of integration between Belarus and Russia realised by Mr Lukashenko enjoys full popular support. The acceptance of close economic, political and military cooperation with Russia is not accompanied by approval for the limitation of national sovereignty. The Belarusians mainly fear the prospects of sending their own soldiers to Chechnya or to Russian garrisons in Central Asia.

The existence of the Belarus state is particularly valuable to some 20% of the inhabitants of Belarus who nurture strong feelings of national identity. That part of the nation is in favour of as broad use of the Belarusian language in the offices and schools as possible. It also refers to historical traditions related with Belarusian culture and statehood. For that part of society the regime of Mr Lukashenko, which promotes the Russian language and looks down on the vision of Belarusian history, is anti-national.

Most of the remaining 80 % of Belarusian society does not negate the need for the existence of the Belarusian state. The acceptance of Belarusian statehood increases in society together with the exchange of generations. It may be assumed that together with the vanishing of the generation which remembers the USSR with nostalgia, the problem of acceptance of Belarus as an independent state will cease to exist.

Over the past ten years hundreds of Belarusians have visited different European countries. Being able to compare Europe and Russia, they opt rather in favour of Europeanising Belarus. Over half of the inhabitants of Belarus are in favour of the entry of their country to the European union. The problem is, however, that there prevails a general lack of belief in the possibility of changes that could bring it about.

Democracy, the framework of which was constructed in the years 1990-1994, has not been accepted by the Belarusian people. A large part of the citizens still associate it with anarchy, inflation and empty shelves in the shops. The lack of self-government institutions leads to the situation that the only manifestations of democracy consist of parliamentary and presidential elections. Most people, however, perceive them as a technical operation, consisting of the formal approval for state authorities which have been selected earlier. Most Belarusians also believe in the effectiveness of the system based on a powerful leader, who is personified by Mr Alexander Lukashenko. It is only among the intelligentsia and the young people that attitudes favouring the democratisation of the country along the lines of the European model prevail.

The rule of Mr Lukashenko has reinforced the lack of belief in the feasibility of democratic solutions. The elections and referenda, which have turned into a political farce justifying the authoritarian government, have compromised the basic instruments of democracy. The generally accepted attitude is to shun the law in daily life, resulting from the conviction that it just legitimises a fictitious world. Moreover, it would be too naive to apply legal norms that are not seriously treated even by their creators.

Most of the inhabitants of Belarus live in poverty. The wages, equivalent to several dozen or so EURO per month are insufficient to cover the basic costs of subsistence, in spite of the still low housing costs and utility charges. The situation of the inhabitants of rural areas is especially dramatic. Without the food coming from the small household plots and gardens, which they can cultivate, their existence would be impossible. But also most of the urban dwellers, from university professors to workers, cultivate such lots. The crops from such household cultivation give some 30 % of the food consumed in Belarus.

A large part of the citizens of that country, however, disposes of monetary assets several times higher than their official disposable income. This is the effect of the peculiar treatment of the law in that country. No tax office is able to assess the incomes of thousands of people involved in cross-border trade. The whole Belarusian business world operates on similar principles. Employees of private firms, in order to evade the excessive taxation, usually officially receive only a part of the amount their due remuneration for their work. The remaining part is handed over by the employers without leaving any traces in the accounting documents, which would give evidence of any such cash transfer.

The shadow economy in Belarus, in spite of the existence of inflated fiscal inspection services, emerged in reaction to the excessive fiscal orientation of the state. In principle, any business activity conducted in compliance with the law would generate a deficit. The general reaction of the Belarusians is therefore to conceal their wealth. Persons declaring monthly incomes of Euro 50 are in possession of new motor cars, high-tech computer equipment and prefer to relax in the fashionable recreation centres and spas in Europe. Most people perceive wealth as the fruit of dishonest dealings. This is why Mr Lukashenko's rhetorical statements announcing the combat of corruption and organised crime are received with acceptance, and especially welcome are the spectacular actions of

arresting the directors of great state-owned enterprises in front of television cameras. The average Belarusian citizen is convinced that he is the victim of incessant theft by dishonest officials, salesmen and employers, but never considers the significance of his own actions consisting of the evasion or infringement of the law.

The political consciousness of the Belarusian citizens is mainly shaped under the influence of the mass media. The events in the world are most often assessed by the Belarusians in terms of categories used by the commentators of popular Russian television channels. They are also more emotionally concerned about what is going on in Russia rather than in Belarus. The situation in their own country is generally regarded as the outcome of political dealings taking place in Moscow. The boring Belarusian television is basically no competition for a number of the most attractive Russian television stations. The information system existing in Belarus, in which the Russian television stations play a dominant role, on the one hand brings the citizens into the habit of treating their own country as a Russian province, and on the other hand, over a number of years it has provided only minimal knowledge about the rules of democracy and elements of market economy.

Eastern Belarus is more pro-Russian, pro-soviet and pro-Lukashenko. Inhabitants of that part of the country more definitely opt for integration with Russia. In the Grodno and Brest districts in the western part of the country, where a large part of the Belarusian citizens live from cross-border trade with Poland, the news about prospects for the introduction of visas and restrictions of the movement of persons are received with concern. In the western part of the republic two channels of Polish public television are received, which provide information about Poland, oriented toward the adaptation of West-European arrangements. The wish of the citizens of Belarus to maintain open borders with Poland is visible, as providing a window to another world, perhaps not as fully understandable as that from the post-soviet zone, but appealing by the prospects of welfare and freedom.

2. Politics

Belarus is a country with an authoritarian regime based on fragile foundations. Its functioning depends exclusively on the rule by the charismatic President Alexander Lukashenko, who using the prerogatives granted by the constitution amended on his own initiative, makes the most important decisions both in the sphere of internal and foreign policy. It may be anticipated with a high degree of probability that a possible change of the person holding the office of the president would inevitably lead to the fall of the system constructed by Mr Lukashenko.

The functioning of Lukashenko's regime and the effective management of the country from the point of view of his interests is possible thanks to the existence of a centralised structure of state administration, which faithfully enacts the president's decisions. This centralised system of government has proved itself very well in the course of the elections and referenda conducted this far, effectively assuring the victories of the president and his political grouping. But the subservience of the government administration officials to the president does not result from their personal devotion, nor from any ideological backing of his policy. It is rather the result of plain conformism and fear of losing their jobs in the event of the fall of his rule. One might risk the stipulation that, for the time being, the bureaucracy unfavourably disposed to Lukashenko is short of an impulse to rebel against its patron. Under certain circumstances, however, the factor acting in favour of the president today – conformism and the lack of ideological orientation of the bureaucracy – could swiftly turn into the Achilles heel of his regime. At least some of today's allies of Mr Lukashenko would be inclined to

desert his camp, if a candidate would emerge in Belarus, who would enjoy sufficiently strong popular support to have a chance stage an equal challenge to Lukashenko in the struggle for the presidency. Although Lukashenko still continues to lead in popularity ratings, the support for him is systematically falling, whereas the popularity of the opposition politicians is rising, even if only slightly. If free and democratic elections would take place in Belarus, therefore, the re-election of Lukashenko could not any longer be taken for granted, the way it has been the case until now.

The attitude of the Belarusian bureaucracy toward Lukashenko depends, above all, on the position adopted by Russia. The bureaucracy fails to trust in its own strength and capacity to act politically on its own account. Moreover, it shares the belief prevailing in Belarus that the key to the future destiny of Lukashenko's regime is in Moscow. Therefore, even that part of the bureaucracy which is dissatisfied with Lukashenko's rule awaits for a clear signal from the Kremlin. This is not to say that the bureaucracy of Belarus perceives its own interests as being fully identical with the interests of Russia. This is indicated by the fact, for example, that many former officials of the President (including some of the current candidates to run for the presidential office) accuse Lukashenko of conducting a pro-Russian policy to the detriment of the interests of Belarus (i.a. the sale to Russians of Belarusian state property at discount prices in exchange for support in the elections).

The Belarusian bureaucracy is horrified by the fact of being replaced by Russians in the administration, special security forces, command positions in the army and the Belarusian national assets being taken over by banks and firms from the Russian Federation. The fear of the threat of becoming politically and professionally marginalized, however, paralyses the Belarusian elites in terms of any possibility of staging any active counteraction to challenge the pressure from the Russians.

The support from Moscow is of key significance for Lukashenko today. The price for such backing consists of his increasing subservience to Russia. Moscow, in turn, exploits Lukashenko's insecurity prior to the elections, and tries to force concessions from him concerning such matters, which it deems significant. The most clear-cut example of that was the signing at the end of last year of the agreement on the introduction of a common currency and Minsk's resignation from staging any resistance to the Russian initiative to establish a joint issuing centre in Moscow. In practical terms this implies the loss by Belarus of one of the attributes of its sovereignty.

Moscow's support for Lukashenko has particular weight also because it has so far provided him with a sufficient external shield. Russia, as one of the few countries that recognise fully Lukashenko's regime and plays the role of its protector and „advocate" on the international scene, contributes in this manner to its survival. The strategy of western countries and international organisations applied hitherto, based on the assumption that the liberalisation of Lukashenko's regime might possibly be „arranged" through the intermediation of Moscow, has been a fiasco. Moreover, that strategy only confirms the belief in Russia and amongst the Belarusian public opinion that the destiny of Belarus continues to be settled above all in Moscow. The isolation of the Belarusian authorities by the West aggravates the complex of the Belarusian bureaucracy with respect to its „elder brother" from the East and paralyses the capacity for any action whatsoever being taken on its part against Lukashenko. In the meantime, Russia, contrary to the hopes of the western countries, does not raise any postulates to the president of Belarus concerning any liberalisation of his rule, including the carrying out of free and democratic elections. It is very probable that the Kremlin, realising its policy of incorporation of Belarus, will be inclined to recognise the results of the presidential election favourable for Lukashenko, even if they will be conducted under conditions not providing the electorate with any authentic freedom of choice, or event might be outright falsified. Lukashenko, in turn, feeling the sort of consent from Moscow for illegal actions and seeking at any price to keep the power over the country, will not take the risk of conducting

the elections in accordance with the standards adopted by democratic countries. This is indicated by the course of the electoral campaign until now.

The Belarusian opposition, eliminated after the constitutional referendum of 1996 from the official structures of the state and pushed out to the margins of political life, does not in fact have any ability to exert any influence upon Lukashenko's regime. Even those few concessions, which the Belarusian authorities have granted it, were above all the result of the pressure of international public opinion. The monopoly of the state over the electronic media restricts the field of activity of the opposition circles to the anti-presidential demonstrations, which it organises. Although these circles enjoy in consequence little social backing, it is thanks to their activity that the international community is informed about the cases of violation of the law and suppression of civil liberties in Belarus. In spite of the fact that the democratic circles are generally perceived as weak, they still represent the most active part of Belarusian society. It is hard to imagine today that they might accept the actual take over of their country by the stronger neighbour. It may be supposed that this circumstance is a significant factor, which partly slows down the imperial plans of Moscow with regards to Belarus.

An important base of the opposition – being a characteristic feature of Belarus on the area of the CIS – is the strongly developed network of non-government organisations, which provide a haven for also for many opposition politicians. A consequence of the policy of Belarusian authorities, guarding the monopoly over all the spheres of public life and destroying any manifestations of independent thought, is the opposition and immersion in politics of the Belarusian „third sector“. Differently than in the case of political parties in opposition, whose activities are above all focused at the capital city of Minsk, non-government organisations cover by their activities also the provincial parts of the country. They favour the development of the outlines of civil society independent from the structures of the state. This allows us to think that the processes of formation of the Belarusian society and the Belarusian nation will continue, in spite of the authoritarian and nationally indifferent regime.

It is worth underlining the mood with respect to the EU that prevail among the political elite in opposition, and even among parts of the present executive organs. For them the European Union is a symbol of welfare. It is also important how the member countries of the Union are perceived in the capacity of being the countries where the law is indeed respected. ■

II.

II. Recommendations

The EU and its candidate countries ought to be aware of the fact that their actions oriented at Belarus might not bring the intended results in any short time. It is rather necessary to be prepared for long-term activities, and not to be discouraged by the lack of immediate spectacular effects. But sudden political changes in Belarus cannot be excluded, which could enable the establishment by the EU of real contacts with that country. Therefore, it is already now the time to work out a consistent policy with regards to Belarus, in order not to be surprised by the possible course of events.

1. New EU Policy concerning Belarus

On the part of the EU it would be very important to treat Belarus as a true subject in the foreign policy of the Union. The relations with Belarus cannot be maintained in the context of relations of the EU with Russia. Belarus should become a part of new eastern policy of the EU recognising the diversity of the areas in its direct neighbourhood to the East. The way of thinking about Belarus as part of the Russian sphere of influence, which is present in some of the EU member countries, is unacceptable. An example can be provided in the joint analysis of the planning departments of the ministries of foreign affairs of Germany and France. It explicitly mentions Moscow as the natural centre of gravity for the CIS countries and negates the possibility of future entry to the EU of Belarus, among other countries.

Based on the assumption that Belarus is a distinct subject for the foreign policy of the Union, Brussels ought to influence the situation in that country not via Moscow, but through direct diplomatic activities in Minsk. In talks conducted with Russia the EU should clearly stress that the undemocratic regime of Lukashenko should not be supported. The issue of the support of that regime by Russian authorities is a similar problem for the future of the relations between the EU and Russia, as was recently the issue of Russian support for the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

The EU should officially declare that it does not exclude the membership of Belarus in the Union in the future. One of the main assumptions of the indicated new eastern policy of the EU, in which Belarus would also have a place, would consist of supporting the pro-European actions of the government of that country. The condition for future inclusion of Belarus among the group of candidates would consist of the will to join the EU expressed by a democratically elected government of Belarus and the acceptance by them of the necessity to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria. Judging by the experience so far, it is difficult to imagine that Lukashenko could possibly meet that condition. This postulate is therefore rather addressed to a subsequent governing group in Belarus.

The presentation by the EU of a European prospect for Belarus would challenge the stereotype that „nobody wants us in Europe”, which is widespread in Belarus also among members of the political elite.

Already now the Union should prepare a programme of tangible aid (e.g. facilitation of access for Belarusian goods to the EU market) in the event of positive changes in that country. In a certain sense it would be a repetition of the Serb scenario.

In the opinion-forming circles of the countries of the present European Union one might encounter the concern that pro-European actions with regard to Belarus might be received by Moscow as being an anti-Russian policy. Most of the Russian political elites perceive Belarus either as a part of Russia, or as a country which belongs to the Russian sphere of influence in a natural way. Such an attitude is unfavourable from the EU point of view, as it is a manifestation of the imperial way of thinking of the Russian elite, in the face of which it is difficult to imagine good EU-Russian relations. A chance of at least partial change of the existing unfavourable way of thinking of the Russian political elite could consist of the convincing it that only close cooperation with the Union of such countries as Belarus, and also Russia itself, might lead to the improvement of the economic condition of the post-soviet area.

2. Counteracting against Isolation

Enormous significance for the shaping of social attitudes in Belarus, favourable from the point of view of the EU, is attached to the issue of free travel of the inhabitants of that country to the Union. It is therefore necessary to introduce maximum facilitation for the citizens of Belarus in their travels to the EU in the framework of the *acquis* of Schengen. It will become particularly important especially after the entry to the Union of the direct neighbours of Belarus – Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. In the future, as close as possible, the EU should consider the possibility of deleting Belarus from the black list of the countries whose citizens are required to possess visas to enter the territory of the Union.

For Belarusians especially important are the contacts with those of its neighbours, who will become members of the Union. Visits in Lithuania, Latvia and in Poland help the Belarusians to be convinced by experience of the advantages that stem from European integration.

In order to prevent the isolation of Belarus it is worthwhile to invest in the growth of the pro-European elite. Especially the scholarship programmes for youth are important. Owing to the close proximity of the languages, a large part of these programmes could be realised in Poland. The education of youth close to Belarus offers greater guarantees that their large part will not lose touch with their fatherland and will return to it. In the case of travels to a greater distance, as practical experience seems to indicate, many people still wish to remain in countries distant from Belarus, and at the same time they lose contact with it.

The knowledge of what the EU is about is far from satisfactory in Belarus. Therefore, an information campaign about the Union ought to be conducted. It would be worthwhile, for example, to organise European days in Minsk and in other towns of Belarus. A more active role in promoting the EU in Belarus could be played by the embassies of the member countries.

The EU should not avoid dialogue with Belarus also on a lower level. Contacts with the Belarusian bureaucracy, which presently supports Lukashenko's regime, but in the future might turn in favour of a different ruling group, could be of key significance for the future relations between the EU and Belarus. Many initiatives approved at the highest levels can surely be effectively blocked by the all-embracing local bureaucracy.

3. Cooperation with the Non-Government Sector and the Trade Unions

Under the conditions of limited contacts on the state level with Belarus, a special place should be given to activities undertaken in concert with the Belarusian non-government sector and with

the trade unions. Contacts with non-government organisations from EU and candidate countries could allow to overcome the increasing psychosis of isolation and hostility toward aliens, on which the current undemocratic regime is based.

No regulations are able to reduce the growing social activities in Belarus. Government decrees restricting the manifestations of social initiative and the lack of support for activities of that kind might prevent the direct cooperation between the EU countries and Belarusian organisations. They cannot, however, forbid the citizens of these countries and the non-government organisations represented by them from delivering incidental humanitarian aid and the transfer of knowledge about the different spheres of life.

The development of a civil society, which would act as an active subject in internal politics and not just as an object of manipulation for the authorities, is the only means for changing the social, political and economic situation in that country, and of assuring its further development. It is necessary to transfer the experience and knowledge needed for the construction of civil society. It is also necessary to assure close cooperation between non-government organisations from EU countries and non-government organisations from the candidate countries, especially Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, concerning projects addressing Belarus. In the case projects of non-government organisations from member countries with the participation of Belarusian partners, it would be worthwhile to provide easier access to funds from the Union.

The development of activities of the local communities could stimulate the process of developing the civil society in Belarus. Therefore, the implementation of many international projects locally could play a significant role in shaping the social attitudes in Belarus, slowing down the increasing impoverishment of Belarusian society and the overcoming of the isolation, which breeds xenophobia.

An important postulate is also for the EU to promote the cooperation of trade unions from its member and candidate countries with shop-floor activists of various trade union organisations in Belarus. In order to popularise democratic attitudes in Belarusian society it of enormous relevance to reach out to the working class communities.

4. Support for Independent Media

The undemocratic regime in Belarus relies on the isolation of the country and limitation of citizens' access to information. Television stations, with the exception of Russian channels, are controlled by the regime. There is still a lack of independent domestic electronic media. The existence in Belarus of two commercial FM broadcasting stations also fails to give access to uncensored information.

Therefore, the independent press functioning in Belarus emerges to assume a particularly vital role. Available research indicates that depending on the title, a single copy of an independent newspaper in Belarus is read by 5 to 10 people. Therefore, although the print runs of independent press titles total some 250 thousand copies, their effective circulation and impact is in reality much more widespread. Nevertheless, the half-million circulation of the major official newspaper "Sovetskaya Belarusya" together with dozens of other official titles reflects the practical monopolisation of the public communications media by the regime. Therefore, support for the free press, as the only means to provide society with access to alternative information is an indispensable factor in the effort to develop the civil society in Belarus. ■

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