

# Germany, the European Union and civil society in Belarus

## I. Reasons for a more pro-active German Foreign Policy on Belarus:

1. With a more pro-active Belarus policy, Germany **could re-establish itself within the European Union as a partner seeking closest possible cooperation with the other member states, including smaller and medium-sized EU states**, thus compensating for the loss of credibility suffered in recent years, among others with Lithuania and Poland.
2. Germany could seize the issue of Belarus and advance the notion that the **shared foreign and security policy of the EU is not dead**, but that it is focussing on one of the most important and politically delicate issues: the promotion of democracy and human rights within the successor states to the Soviet Union – in accordance with the Paris Charter adopted in November 1989.
3. The promotion of democracy and human rights in Belarus is of profound importance to Germany and Europe. From a moral, security policy and economic point of view, **it is not acceptable that the EU tolerate a repressive, authoritarian system on its border**. The unification of Europe will only be completed when the last dividing line has been surmounted.
4. Addressing the issue of Belarus at the political level of communication will indicate to **Russia** that Germany and the EU are not willing to accept violations of jointly agreed upon standards (Charter of Paris, November 1990), thus hopefully generating a change of attitude in Moscow on the democratic transformation process in Eastern Europe. Once the Russian foreign policy is challenged in a credible manner, it is felt that concessions could be achieved which are important for the democratic transformation in Europe.
5. Germany is held in high regard by the citizens of Belarus, and enjoys a high level of trust. **Germany has a historical obligation to support the country** that suffered so much during the Second World War.

The political liberalization of Belarus may generate **economic stimuli for the EU and Germany**, particularly since trade in the country is already increasingly oriented towards the West. As part of an overall strategy, the democratisation of the country may **prevent migration into Europe, and secure European jobs**.

## II. A Regime - based on electoral Fraud

Undoubtedly, **Lukashenko and his administrators severely manipulated the most recent presidential elections** and restricted the development of the political and social opposition in every respect. The population was intimidated and is dependent on the state government to a large extent financially. Except for the consumer sector, private companies depend on state contracts, and the independent media are only able to maintain a marginal existence with the help of foreign assistance.

Independent opinion surveys indicate that **the population supports an evenly balanced policy of cooperation with the European Union and Russia**, without wishing to compromise on national independence. The primary economic advantages for a large section of the population offer an advantage to the regime, as opposed to the disadvantages faced by citizens in the face of numerous forms of suppression and state despotism – above all in the criminal courts and state prisons, as well as in interrogation centres. But that part of the population living under authoritarian framework conditions constitutes a minority – as is the case in all countries under autocratic, authoritarian rule

As was already the case in 2001, OSCE election monitors identified severe flaws in the electoral procedure during the presidential election in 2006, together with violations of the electoral law and OSCE standards. These reports have been loudly criticised by Moscow and Minsk, who demand the elimination or modification of the OSCE practise of organising international electoral monitoring. If EU member states wish to maintain the important agreements reached regarding international election monitoring, also taking other “problem states” in the OSCE into account, they must give a clear indication now that there are limits to European concessions.

Regardless of the political sanctions which were imposed by the European Union and other European institutions and governments against the Lukashenko regime after 1996, when Lukashenko, who had been freely elected in 1994, imposed a constitutional coup d’etat with the aim of politically eliminating the opposition and promoting the nomenclature which had been adopted from the former Soviet Union, **the European Union, and its member states have to date failed to systematically support the political and social opposition which grew out of the mass organisations which had survived the Soviet era (trade unions, women’s and youth organisations).**

There is no proactive strategy of the European Union that unequivocally presents itself as such.

### **III. The European Union without a Political Strategy for Belarus – quo vadis GASP?**

The European Union and its member states have been demanding for over a decade that the Lukashenko regime observe the OSCE standards for the democratic transformation process agreed upon in the Charter of Paris in November 1990, which triggered off long term democratic developments in many parts of central and eastern Europe. In Belarus, beginning in 1996, Lukashenko revoked the democratic state and social structures that had been put in place since 1991.

In November 1999, the Russian President Yeltsin and the Belarusian President signed – together with the other Heads of State and Government from states participating in OSCE activities - an agreement in Paragraph 22 of the OSCE Summit Declaration in Istanbul that they would implement democratic reforms (parliamentary rights, freedom of the press, independent courts and the cessation of the legal and political suppression of the opposition) in cooperation with the OSCE Mission and by way of agreements negotiated and reached with the political opposition. In connection with the presidential elections in 2001, the majority of the concessions made by Lukashenko towards a democratic development were revoked. Even if the OSCE may be seen by many to be weak and marginalised, the observance of OSCE agreements by participating states continues to be important for Europe. The OSCE

mechanism represents a step forward in terms of politically binding international law across Europe which should not be abandoned.

In the spring of 2002, the European Union struck Belarus off the priority list of its international “Human Rights and Democracy” support programme, while at the same time, **continuing a limited TACIS programme, the implementation of which required the agreement of the Belarusian government, however, and which – thus far - was unable to provide any real support to democratic opposition groups.** In 2002, the OSCE mission in Minsk lost the right gained in 1997 to directly promote the democratic movement.

Thanks to private initiatives and funds from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation, Germany is providing a significant level of support for Chernobyl-related projects and programmes in the field of health and education, but is reluctant to become involved in discussions regarding a political strategy aimed at offering civil society structural support in its political battle with the regime in order to push through and implement basic democratic rights, primarily fair and free elections. **Poland and Lithuania in particular are demanding such a political strategy from the European Union.** They are cooperating with the USA in this area, **since the European Union has responded with only a limited degree of understanding,** and has shown no willingness to promote a proactive policy of this nature.

#### **IV. The European Union needs a proactive Policy for Belarus – for the sake of Civil Society**

The European institutions have repeatedly supported the political opposition in their public declarations and criticised the repressive measures adopted by the regime. In particular, they have published a report on missing persons the (Pourgourides report of the parliamentary assembly of the European Council), but for a number of reasons, they have been highly reticent with regard to the development of a coherent political strategy for the direct promotion of democracy and freedom in Belarus.

This reticence can be explained in a number of ways, such as

- The cooperation with Russia, which is itself worthy of criticism with regard to democracy and political freedom, as are other former member states of the Soviet Union
  
- The lack of experience at the European level in applying the wide-ranging mechanisms for directly promoting the opposition movement in Belarus or in any other country, without involving the government concerned, and
  
- Fear of political aspirations for EU membership on the part of Belarus

Primarily, European experts and government bodies regard the Belarus problem as being an issue which is without doubt of importance to its immediate neighbours (Poland, Lithuania,

Ukraine, Russia), but not to the EU as a whole. In any case, they feel it is desirable to discuss the democratisation process in Belarus with Moscow.

The disadvantages of the apparent low level approach regarding a direct engagement towards and in cooperation with the opposition structures are obvious:

- Verbal support aside, the Belarus opposition feels abandoned by the European Union and the member states in its battle with the authoritarian regime. Europe is losing credibility with regard to its stance on undemocratic, authoritarian regimes in Europe.
  
- The USA has been accepted by the opposition as the major partner regarding direct, proactive support, although this support is politically highly “vulnerable” in the light of the situation in Iraq and the problematic issue of the US prisons in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Lukashenko can “score points” when he tells the population that he regards the prospect of a US attack on Belarus as being probable, rather than out of the question.

**The European Council must approve a strategy** aimed at demanding democracy from the Lukashenko government, both by offering concrete recommendations and by discussing the issue with Moscow. **At the same time, and independently of contacts with the government, a series of programmes must be approved which are designed to support the repressed opposition in the country by means of concrete measures**, in order to credibly present the population with an alternative to the repressive regime:

1. a democratic order
2. a free market society with a strong basis in society
3. the rule of law, also in the courts

In order to be able to do this, **the European Union has to develop and bring to bear new mechanisms** which can be used to implement the democratic strategy, including:

- (1) **The nomination of an EU Special Representative for Belarus** and the formation of an advisory committee comprising high-profile European politicians and experts.
- 2) **The establishment of a democratic fund for Belarus** with special implementation regulations which do justice to the actual situation in Belarus.
- (3) **The provision of electronic platforms abroad** (transmitters, TV), which can be used by the citizens of Belarus in order to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable flow of information and public debate on outstanding Belarusian issues discussion to the country.
- (4) **Advisory and discussion platforms in the West, with participants of high standing from Europe and the member states** for discussion and consultation with the political and social opposition “on terms of equity” terms”.
- (5) **The development of programmes**, e.g. for electoral monitoring by local residents and base organisation initiatives; for support in the establishment of an informal, permanent committee for the opposition abroad, for the development of political coalitions for the election campaign, and for the formation of governments and government programmes.

(6) **Training and further education placements in Europe** for students, academic teachers, scientists, economists, politicians, journalists, groups and organisations (women's' groups, students, trade unions, computer scientists/political scientists).

(7) At a **German level, political coalition partners should discuss and elaborate the strategy to be adopted regarding Belarus**, which should address several basic issues:

- A parallel strategy towards the government and civil society in Belarus
- The promotion of democracy as an instrument of German foreign policy in Eastern Europe
- The role of political foundations
- German initiatives in the European institutions; cooperation/agreement with the USA regarding the promotion of democracy - no direct demand regarding the person of Lukashenko, but on the need for change of the political framework conditions – from authoritarian regime to democratic constitution and institutions.

(8) The desirable involvement of France in this process may be achieved via joint governmental talks, or – together with Poland – via the Weimar triangle. Lithuania and Latvia have to be consulted on this matter.

## **V. Procedures**

**This list of measures is temporary in nature**, but also contains several recommendations, the implementation of which is of direct importance to the standing of Germany in Eastern and Central Europe. Some measures can be implemented rapidly, while others are more of a long-term significance. In any case, they are potentially more effective than the EU resolutions agreed to date.

It is clear that sanctions in the form of visa restrictions and limitations in cooperation can be regarded as being steps in the right direction, but they only represent one side of the coin in terms of the range of possible responses by the West. A political strategy must not be limited to visa sanctions.

Only proactive measures can lead to a change in the political development and the prospects for the political and social opposition in Belarus.

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Dr. Hans-Georg Wieck  
Chairman

Stefanie Schiffer  
Deputy Chairman

Dr. Helmut Lippelt  
Member of the Committee