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2013 Strategy Paper on the situation in Belarus and recommendations for active measures to be taken by the European Union and its Member States

The Situation: Belarus on stand-by.

The foreign policy pursued by the dictator Alexander Lukashenko can aptly be described, to use an expression steeped in history, as a display of “seesaw politics”. His policy this year has further continued his attempts to secure his position of power on the international stage and to secure control over the country and its people in an emotional way i.e. through patriarchal and disciplinarian means.

Developments in Eastern Europe are governed by internal political turbulence in Moscow, by the struggle pushing towards a decision on ratification of the treaty of association between the European Union and Ukraine, and by the stalemate in the relationship between the European Union and Belarus, which is a relationship shaped by confrontation. The Eastern Partnership Summit in November in Vilnius presents an opportunity for assessing the situation and for making an impact.

The people of Belarus’ economic dependence on the system continues its inevitable decline: Because of the state economy’s enormous economic problems, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians earn the money needed to support their families abroad and with private “family businesses” in Belarus. Around half of family income is earned in hard cash. The distance between Belarusians and the regime is widening and trust is dwindling in the country’s ability to forge a successful future under the current conditions. It would be wrong, however, to infer an increase in willingness amongst the people of Belarus to engage in protest – they are, after all, up against an enormous state apparatus of control and repression led by the KGB.

The opposition political parties and non-governmental organisations – as weak as they may be faced with the on-enduring policy of repression rendering them unable to gain any specific attention from the general public – record examples of and are themselves evidence for the European consciousness of shared values of human dignity – a consciousness which also exist in Belarus – and the relevance of these values for the development of an open society in Belarus with free and fair elections, entrepreneurial initiative and responsibility for business and technical innovation, as well as the demand for independent courts.

It is a weakness of the open societies in Europe that the political opposition's lack of impact is interpreted as a self-inflicted shortcoming resulting from their lack of good standing in the Belarusian public sphere. This argument is nothing but a fig leaf hiding an opportunistic willingness to cooperate with an authoritarian government – a government which both holds and exercises the monopoly on violence in the country.

After decades of the collective consciousness being shaped in a certain way, the personal experience of political freedom, of pursuing a fulfilling career and of participating in the economic and social development of the country is of critical importance for the country's future prospects. A society's development in a county in Europe is led first and foremost by the people being prepared to accept responsibility and to influence the economic processes, the country's political culture and its education and training institutions – otherwise the country grinds to a halt.

This is the situation Belarus finds itself in today – and this has been the situation for almost two decades.

Today, there is international consensus that the socialist planned and state economy imploded because of its lack of innovation and absence of competition. Not even the monopoly of violence controlled by the state, party and secret services in the Soviet bloc could provide a long-term solution to this reality.

Given this historical background, which is anchored firmly in the consciousness of the people, it must be the aim of our efforts to support the citizen's process of self-discovery, his freedom to make decisions, his education, his professional qualifications and his social responsibility – in the interests of the citizen himself and of the country as a whole. Without this shift in citizens' consciousness, the formal adoption of European values remains, in the way it is perceived by the people, a process introduced, if not inflicted, from the outside. The logic of these values cannot be understood and they are therefore unable to lead to those things which an open society can achieve in terms of political dialogue, commercial development and social security.

The Lukashenko regime is preventing democratic political parties from reaching their potential, it is hindering medium-sized businesses and it is impeding the qualification of skilled workers – and it is doing this in an economy which is exposed to the competition of international markets.

With the analysis of the “Human Rights Situation in Belarus” now being presented, the association “Menschenrechte in Belarus e. V.” aims to contribute to a realistic assessment of the internal constitution of the country, in which even the minimum standards governing citizens' rights and their protection against the despotism of state and society, as defined by the United Nations in 1948 and affirmed by the European documents for the European region, are abused: There are no free and fair elections, there is no independent legal system and there is no free speech, no freedom of assembly and no religious freedom. Belarus is one of the few countries where the death penalty not only continues to exist as a formal punishment but where it is also applied – and that as a result of dubious court processes.

From the polls conducted by independent public opinion research institutes, it is possible to see a fall in the population's trust in the long-term ability of the regime to manage the country's social and economic problems. Pro-Russian and pro-Western tendencies balance each other out. Many of the country's citizens hope to maintain good relationships with both centres of power. Trust in the market economy is on the increase.

Essentially, the country does have economic potential, including in the industrial sector, but this is not being sufficiently used because of a lack of market economy reforms. Advantageous prices for crude oil from Russia make it possible to export oil products profitably to the EU market. Official planned quotas for industrial production lead to excess stocks when there is a miscalculation of the market.

Belarus continues to suffer from high rates of inflation.

From the official Belarusian point of view, the country's membership in the Eastern Partnership has brought the country no political or economic advantages. The principles and the practise of Belarus' general policy towards the West and, in particular, Belarus' policy towards Germany are rooted in the goals of the Eastern Partnership and represent a constructive and credible option for steering the country towards sustainable democratic development

Catalogue of Measures

1. **Transformation Centres.** The association "Menschenrechte in Belarus e. V." is a strong supporter of the development of "Transformation Centres" in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. This includes a Centre at the European Humanities University of Minsk (EMU), which is currently in Lithuanian exile. Such Centres should, in co-operation with other academic and research institutions, develop academic courses for political sciences, economics and business administration which pay particular attention to the challenges of transformation. Trade and commerce in the countries of the European Union and its neighbourhood exist in economic competition with one another. For this reason, the dual education, including both practical and theoretical/academic aspects, of specialists in all areas of the commercial and service sectors is essential. Deficiencies exist at the EHU in this respect, as they do in the educational programmes in other Eastern Partnership countries. This issue must be addressed in a meaningful way. Business and political foundations must adjust their development strategies for Eastern and Middle Europe.

2. **Education and training for Belarusians in the Member States of the European Union.** The association "Menschenrechte in Belarus e. V." is committed to extending opportunities for people from Belarus to study in the countries of the European Union. These are people who can one day perform qualified work in Belarus and who support the development of public spirit and initiatives, indeed practising them themselves. In this way, these people contribute to the prosperity and diversity of society, which are to be found in the historical roots of this region but have fallen victim to authoritarian systems. Symposia should – in the context of the modernisation debate – work with civil society in the countries of the Eastern Partnership to identify needs and ways of satisfying these needs, e.g. for the field of IT, for engineering, business administration, economics and law, but also for skilled trades in medium-sized businesses and in almost all areas of the service sector. Practical experience contributes to the development of trust in an open society, in which a solid middle-class economy and a pluralistic party landscape can and do become the most important pillars of democracy – as is the case in most EU Member States. The visa policy which has already been relaxed in practical terms for the majority of the population should be further liberalised in order to support the projects discussed in this paper.

3. **School education cooperation programmes between the EU Member States and Belarus.** The Belarusian regime, in spite of all its measures against plurality, is currently showing openness for education cooperation programmes for schools. In particular, the participant numbers at the “German language diploma of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs”, offered by the German side, are continually rising and the Belarusian side has declared its interest in further increasing the participant numbers. As a rule, in the school programmes connected to this conference, not only language skills are taught, but cultural aspects and values are also discussed. The Member States should therefore check whether their measures in the area of school education programmes can be maintained and, where possible, intensified, for example through personal and financial investment in courses teaching languages of the European Union. Existing organisations on the German side, but also organisations from other EU Member States (such as the Institut Français) could be open to such programmes.

4. **The policy of sanctions against Belarus.** The policy of sanctions against Belarus is often critically questioned by opponents with the argument that no change in the regime’s behaviour can be brought about and that, on the contrary, the regime becomes more rigid in its position. Above all, the sanctions express solidarity with the repressed people and they are a sign of the European Union and its Member States’ conviction to not even raise the suggestion of the regime’s democratic legitimacy as long as human rights are being trampled in the way they have been in the Belarus which Lukashenko has shaped since 1996. Lukashenko not only demonstrates his readiness for conflict towards the European Union but also occasionally towards his ally, the Russian Federation. Sustainable progress on the path towards a democratic Belarus will undoubtedly lead to an improvement and a deepening of this relationship and cooperation. Media reports make it clear that many discussion topics are kept under wraps. This is not good. In the parliamentary bodies of the European Institutions, the development of the country is repeatedly made the topic of discussion and this should remain the case. The people of Belarus should know that the sanctions are for the – now self-elected – President and his paladins and not for the citizens of the country. The list of names of regime representatives whose entry into the European Union is restricted is, in this respect, an effective and visible reflection of the clearly targeted criticism which should be maintained and, if required, extended. The measures of repression and the brutal prosecution procedures targeting presidential candidates for the election in December 2010, as well as valid doubts over the executions carried out in 2012 of the alleged perpetrators of the subway explosions, provide renewed reason to disqualify the man who clings to power in Minsk from being considered a trustworthy head of state within the European community.

5. **Media.** Via electronic media, the country’s citizens continue to have access to the developments in the rest of the world, above all in Europe – even if surveillance in Belarus is growing. Targeted programming in Russian and Belarusian remains necessary. Journalist trips to Germany and to the European Union must continue to be organised on a regular basis.

Future prospects

With the measures proposed in this Strategy Paper (Transformation Centres, Education and training for Belarusians, School education programmes, policy of sanctions and media support), we want to improve the support of citizens and civil society. In spite of the current lack of relevant short-term political achievements, Belarus remains with its authoritarian system and the citizens of the country – trapped without freedom – in the focus of our attention. The European Union must not refuse to take a constructive and intensified approach to Belarus. Although the Union faces many short-term financial challenges, it must also prove its ability to make a difference in foreign policy with actions designed to have a long-term impact on the situation in Belarus. Part of this approach must always be a willingness to cooperate.

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