

Introduction

The idea for the project entitled 'A European Choice for Belarus' under which the present publication was produced first emerged when it became clear that the economic liberalisation promised by Alyaksandr Lukashenka during his campaign for the Belarusian presidency in 2001 will not occur anytime soon. Although a certain stabilisation was observed in the Belarusian economy, a number of negative tendencies remained: increasing costs of living, pauperisation of large sections of the Belarusian society, snowballing debt of state-owned enterprises, etc. The authoritarian regime adopted a harder line in its policies, and public opinion polls were indicating that President Lukashenka's popularity is falling. These various factors have led us to once again take up the issue of reforms in Belarus.

Our project, launched in the summer of 2002, did not emerge from a vacuum, and its execution would not have been possible were it not for the independent think tanks operating in the country which put out a number of important works in the course of 2001 and 2002. In one of these, entitled 'Integration of Belarus and Russia. Analytical Articles' (Minsk, Encyclopedics Publishing House, 2002), the authors argue that the union between Belarus and Russia is little but an institutional fiction, with the perspective of eventual union between the two a mere illusion. Belarus – their reasoning continues – can by all means preserve her independence, but comprehensive reforms of the economy, political system, education, and of social policy will be called for.

In preparing 'A European Choice for Belarus. Scenarios for Reform', we were endeavouring:

- Firstly, to posit scenarios for changes by virtue of which Belarus will achieve compliance with the minimum requirements demanded by the European Union of candidate countries;
- Secondly, to once again draw attention to the pressing problems faced by the country;
- Thirdly, to provide new encouragement for discussion of democratic reforms;
- Fourthly, to demonstrate the existence of persons and entities in Belarusian society who regard their country as a bona fide member of the European polity.

We were also aiming to create a publication which will be useful to those with limited knowledge of Belarus and the processes currently underway in the country. Accordingly, this book will be published not only in Belarusian, but also in English and in Russian language versions.

The project has elicited a lively response among economists, political scientists, lawyers, sociologists, educators, and among persons whose work focuses on various aspects of social policy. In its initial stages, the project called for the adoption of a joint position as regards the general premises of the required reforms. Thus, during the first meeting of our participating experts (held in September 2002), we formulated a consensus as to the democratic reforms in Belarus which could serve as a point of departure for the project as well as agreeing a basic framework for the book, as subsequently reflected in the structure of its chapters. The contents assumed substance and detail in the course of consecutive meetings of smaller groups working on specific issues.

An important element of the entire project was comprised in the 'outside perspective'. The meetings involved specialists from Central Europe who not only enriched the discussion with insights about their respective countries, but also contributed their comments and critique of the ideas formulated by the Belarusian participants.

This publication has benefited from valuable contributions by:

- Reviewers: Ruta Vainiene (Lithuania), Elżbieta Królikowska (Poland), Józef Płoskonka (Poland), Vladislav Romanov (Ukraine);
- Foreign experts: Galina Agapowa (Estonia), Dariusz Filar (Poland), Elka Georgieva-Nikolova (Bulgaria), Ihor Kolushko (Ukraine), Martin Valentovič (Slovakia), Tomasz Żukowski (Poland);
- Belarusian specialists: Nina Antanovich, Liavon Barshcheuski, Mikalai Burdyka, Paval Serashkovich, Paval Daneyka, Henadz Hermanovich, Mikha-il Husakouski, Alena Karpievich, Andrus Klikunou, Ales Lahvinec, Uladzimer Lukevich, Alyksandr Macias, Siarhei Pyacinkin, Uladzimer Rouda, Halina Ruseckaja, Sofia Savelava, Alyksandr Sasnou, Valery Sidarchuk, Andrei Vardamatski, Halina Verameichyk, Mikalai Zaprudzki, Barys Zhaliba, Alyksandr Zhuchkou;
- Our sponsors: National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute.

Our heartfelt thanks extend to all!

Project Co-Ordinators:
Agnieszka Komorowska
Ales Antsipenka
Valer Bulhakau
September 2003