

Prospects for European Integration of Belarus

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Introduction

The project known as the 'Western Choice for Belarus' reflects our vision of the country's future as a democratic state integrated into the European political, legal, and cultural space. Belarus in Europe is not just a dream of a handful of intellectuals. We believe it is a goal to guide the whole logic of future democratic transformation, and for a reason. In Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), political and economic reforms and the European integration were interrelated parts of a coherent strategy that determined the context and the substance of post-Communist transformation. 'Return to Europe' was a successful political slogan that captured the gist of the reforms. The prospect of joining the European Union was a driver of radical changes. It allowed for maintaining the pace and depth of reforms at a time when their political and social costs proved to be prohibitive for societies and national elites, while the reforms were coming under political attack.

European standards in political and economic systems, principles of state-society relations and solutions for ethnic conflicts provided the reformist elites with answers as to which goals they had to reach, for what reason, and what should be the final destination of transition. Meanwhile, on top of justifying painful and unpopular reforms, efforts to join the EU also guaranteed irreversibility of the rule of law, complete break-up with the Communist past, and upro-

oting fear. 'Europe' is the fundamental factor that can largely explain differences in the dynamics and final outcomes of transition in those post-Communist countries where reforms were carried out, respectively, within and outside the context of European integration. This has important implications for Belarus, the only East European country that has yet to determine its trajectory of democratic and market reforms.

The obstacles on Belarus' path towards Europe may seem to be insurmountable. The first is indisputably inherent to the country. To what extent do Belarusians see themselves as part of the European civilization, of its political and cultural tradition? Nowadays, return to Europe is a dream cherished only by those, including (dissident) elites, who take the country's historical belonging to the European civilization for granted. However, nowadays those in question are a sizeable albeit not dominant societal segment, and have no role in strategic decision-making that affects the country's long-term future. For other Belarusians, Europe is a terra incognita that they still have to fully discover, if they wish so, that is. The second obstacle is attributable to Europe or, more precisely, the EU which, by and large, not so much fails to recognize Belarus as a part of Europe's political and cultural space as lacks elementary awareness of the country and nation. Still, as Belarus and the EU are becoming direct neighbors, they are bound to develop new mechanisms and rules in relations. It is noteworthy that the new neighborhood will be built in the context of a profound political, economic, and social transformation of Belarus which will proceed regardless of how much longer the country will remain in the present-day authoritarian setting. The EU can assist democratic changes in Belarus to the extent to which the Belarusian society will be capable of taking advantage of the opportunities opened by co-operation with the EU in order to ensure an irreversible course of reforms that will start sooner or later irreversible.

European future of the new neighbors: the EU position

Prospects for a European future of Belarus and other newly independent states in Eastern Europe largely depend upon the degree of EU openness for such integration. Now, that the EU turned from a mere international organization into a complex system that significantly defines Europe as an entity, it dictates the rules of the game and sets the framework for the window of opportunities open to its neighbors.

The current vision of Europe beyond the EU has been formulated in 'Wider Europe: Neighborhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbors'¹, a document that determines the strategy of EU relations with new neighbors in Eastern Europe and Southern Mediterranean regions who will border the Union after its enlargement in 2004–2007. The document acknowledges the Union's responsibility not only before its members, but also before the new neighbors in securing social stability and economic dynamism. The EU recognizes its interest in fostering relations with neighbors on the basis of common values, adherence to policies that would prevent new division lines in Europe from, and promote stability and prosperity inside and beyond the new EU borders. In exchange for demonstrating a credible commitment to European values, the new neighbors are promised a role in the European common market along with gradual liberalization of the movement of goods, services, capital, and labor (the four freedoms). This includes the prospect of trade liberalization, a softening – and possibly lifting – of the visa regime, closer cooperation in science, education, and security, etc. The document insists that, in future, the new neighbors may be as closely related with the EU as EU non-members can possibly be. Also, the document asserts that a new neighborhood policy is developed for countries that will not be EU members in medium-term, not to mention short-term. EU membership has already been ruled out for countries of the Southern Mediterranean. As for the four East European countries (including Belarus),

¹ *Wider Europe-Neighborhood: A New Framework for Relations with Our Eastern and Southern Members. Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 11 March 2003.*

the provision of the Treaty Establishing the European Union allowing for each European country to apply for EU membership, and stipulating their compliance with the Copenhagen criteria (democracy, functioning market economy, respect for human and minority rights, and ability to meet all the obligations under EU membership, including adoption of the European law) is still valid for them. At the same time, accession talks cannot be started with those countries until the EU itself resolves the issue of its ultimate geographic frontiers. Since the new members are to take full part in this debate, the issue will only be considered within several years.

In our opinion, the document is by all means relevant in emphasizing that integration of new neighbors may only proceed on the basis of common values and institutional framework, and in maximum approximation, which would provide for practical realization of these values. In other words, the internal Europeanization of new members is a pre-requisite for their European integration. Optimistically, the EU expresses its commitment to pursue rapprochement with new neighbors in practice. In other words, new neighbors (especially East European countries that bear theoretical chances for joining the EU in future) are offered a completely reasonable alternative: either 'become European' from within or lose chances for integration. Beside, the document sets out a broad range of advantages for new neighbors on the condition that their internal institutions are approximated to European standards. Nowadays, however, the prospects are written down with no mention of benchmarks or deadlines, which can possibly be done in forthcoming, more detailed documents of the EU.

It is regrettable, however, that the document does not discern European and non-European EU members, which automatically casts a shadow of pessimism onto a European future for Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. Moreover, in spite of the document's positive rhetoric, statements of some European leaders lead one to conclude that Europe's enlargement eastward of the Bug river is seen by them as unfeasible and unnecessary. (Examples include a recent statement by Romano Prodi: 'It makes no difference for me that Ukrainians or Armenians feel European, because New Zealanders feel Europeans as well'). Here, one can immediately refer to the contradictions between the goals of a new neighborhood

policy and the instruments suggested for its implementation. The internal choice in favor of Europe may not be made by the new neighbors once they are denied the prospect of membership in the EU. Thus, the very prospect of a negative answer may have the worst possible impact on their further development. This would raise the stakes of those forces inside these countries which build their strategies on the premise that ‘no one waits for us in Europe’ and pursue authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political projects and strive for a bureaucratized economy that works exclusively to benefit oligarchic groupings.

This is why prospects for a democratic future of new neighbors in the Western CIS including Belarus will be boosted once the new neighborhood policy recognizes their being part of Europe. Thus, the optimal form of relations in short and medium term would be to develop the Eastern Dimension in the EU foreign policy². This implies a higher level of engagement and, correspondingly, a higher threshold of conditions for the new neighbors to comply with. Unquestionably, relations with each country should be built case by case, but this implies not so much specific goals or ultimate levels of integration as specific means that would take into account the difference in starting points from which each of the countries begins its rapprochement with Europe. For Belarus, the specificity is naturally contextualized by the necessity to pursue democratic transformation before prospects for joining the EU open.

Why, however, should the EU be concerned with closer integration with the new European neighbors, including Belarus? Firstly, such policy would be in the interest of the EU itself, which publicly declared its commitment to avoiding new division lines in Europe and promoting prosperity beyond the borders of the Union by means of policies aimed at promoting reforms, sustainable development and trade. Achievement of such policy goal as securing stability, prosperity, and economic drive in new neighboring countries will create additional pre-requisites for strengthening Europe itself. This cannot be achieved without active efforts on both sides. The lack of interest or clear signals of com-

² For more details on the suggested Eastern Dimension, see C. Guicherd, *The EU and Belarus: From Zero to a Positive Sum Game* [in:] *EU and Belarus: Between Moscow and Brussels*, London: The Federal Trust, 2002. p. 317–336.

mitment, or investments on behalf of the EU, however, makes it unlikely for the new neighbors to be enthusiastic about building a 'belt' of good neighborhood on their part. This is why doing nothing is not an alternative for new neighbors. The issue is only whether the efforts will be invested in their democratic future or in constructing new *cordons sanitaires*.

Belarus is an important link in the chain of new neighbors and, importantly, a direct European neighbor of the EU which will soon have a nearly 1,000 kilometer-long border with the Union. In these circumstances, lack of interest in closer relations may be justifiable on the EU only with the presumption that Belarus will forever remain what it is now: a politically unacceptable albeit not particularly troubling neighbor. It would be naive to consider, however, that Lukashenka's regime will preserve tranquility and stability on EU's Eastern border. Belarus is bound to change, and it is in Europe's interests that it changes for better. Otherwise, if political change processes take place in political turmoil and economic crisis, one may expect deterioration of all the accompanying conditions (such as intensified illegal migration, drug trafficking, trade in humans, etc.), which will have an undeniably negative impact on the EU.

Besides, the historic, cultural, economic, and human ties of Belarus with the new member states elicit a particular interest on the part of Poland, Lithuania, or Latvia in continuing close ties with Belarus and vice versa. While not part of European political structures, Belarus will be economically drawn into the process of EU enlargement, and this will open new opportunities for increasing EU influence in Belarus. It goes without saying that issues of mutual interest, such as transport, environmental protection, combating crime and illegal migration will push the sides towards rapprochement.

Finally, engagement with new neighbors is not a charitable act. Multiple increase in trade with CEECs in the process of their European integration has created pre-requisites for a more dynamic growth in the EU itself. Undoubtedly, if Belarus executes political and economic reforms, it may become both a sales market for European corporations and a destination for their investment.

Thus, promotion of the European integration of new neighbors is the only way in which the EU can create a 'belt' of prosperity and stability on its Eastern

borders. This would not be a charitable act to the new neighbors. Rather, this will be an investment in EU's own future.

Belarus: positive and negative pre-requisites in European integration

Political Regime

Is it reasonable today to speak about Belarus' place in Europe and its prospects for its European integration at all? No other country in Europe today is as far from complying with any of the Copenhagen criteria as Belarus. The problem mainly stems from the nature of its political regime, particularly from the concentration of absolute authority in the presidency, window dressing nature of representative institutions, lack of free and fair elections, censorship of mass media and blatant disregard for human rights. Since Alexander Lukashenka's re-election in 2001, the political regime has tightened repressive policies, clearly tending towards 'sultanization' (strengthening of the ruler's arbitrary rule and his entrenchment in a power system based on loyalty to the leading person). This tendency may be illustrated by facts of repression against the independent media and non-governmental organizations, discrimination against non-orthodox religious communities, establishment of political control in the tertiary education system and attempts to reintroduce ideological control over the society. All this severely limits opportunities for self-organization of the civic society and narrows down areas of autonomy from the regime's political hegemony. It should be noted that the politics of self-isolation from Western and European communities is an integral part of Belarusian authorities' strategy to maintain authoritarian control in the country.

A change of regime and transition towards democracy is a pre-requisite for renewing and normalizing EU-Belarus relations. Only then can one talk about Belarus' European integration. However improbable the prospect for democratization may seem in the nearest future, it may not be ruled out altogether. Along the political developments that broaden the gap between Belarus and

the rest of Europe, internal processes of social, economic and cultural change may breed the necessary pre-requisites (discussed below) for democratization within short time, at least if judged by the standards of history. This should be taken into account in developing a strategy of relations with Belarus, and the existing political regime cannot be regarded as a constant. Authoritarianism is a stage of political development through which most European countries have passed on their way from traditional to a civic society, many in more repressive forms than the one currently existing in Belarus. This path was always smooth and problem-free. Authoritarian rule collapsed under internal processes of political and social change as well as owing to solidarity and commitment of the democratic world. In this sense, the experience of Belarus is not unique for Europe, although – in its political momentum – it lags even behind neighbors with a similar historic fate. Among factors that make political transition in Belarus unavoidable are the transformation of political culture and social structure of the Belarusian society, and gradual economic system failure, international context changes (extinction of the Cold War mentality due to which Alyaksandr Lukashenka was capable of preserving his image of the last stronghold against NATO expansion in the minds of Russian elites). Meanwhile, Belarus has a chance unparalleled by its neighbors in the Western part of the former USSR (such as Ukraine or Moldova). Since, it has yet to begin its political and economic reforms, there is an opportunity to build their philosophy and strategy on principles compatible with the goal of European integration. It is the comparative advantage of backwardness: the laggard is better informed about the frontrunners' experience and is aware of consequences of alternative policy choices, as well as the balance of their benefits and losses. For example, future reformers may be free from the delusions of their predecessors as to the virtue of gradual reforms, and thus avoid mistakes in determining the future political and economic system of the country. This may be helpful in avoiding the institutional inertia, when imperfect institutions are taken over by interest groups that hamper future reforms and push the country towards a grey/shadow zone between democracy, market, and Europe on the one hand and authoritarianism, bureaucratized oligarchic system, and 'post-Soviet space' on the other. Thus, re-

forms are a chance for the Europeanization of Belarus, and this should be understood both in Belarus and Europe.

Economic model

The inability to set up a functioning market economy is another major obstacle on Belarus' course towards Europe. Rejection of market reforms brought the Belarusian economy to a condition that somewhat reminds of Soviet-style system' realities confined by the Russia-Belarus union. Belarus has almost completely preserved the old Soviet industrial base predominantly oriented towards the Russian market. The EU is a far less important trade partner, and its importance is further reduced if netted of processing and re-exports of Russian raw materials. The situation, however, considerably changes once new EU members are included.

Table 16. Belarus Trade with Current and New EU Members (1st half of 2002)

	Total % of trade volume	Exports, % of total volume	Imports, % of total volume
Current EU members*	15.8	16.8	15.3
Current and new EU members combined**	28.0	34.6	21.7

*Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom. No data for Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden.

** Including Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia. Data not available for Cyprus and Malta.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus.

To some extent, the structure of Belarus' trade with Europe resembles a classic example of a Third World country that exports raw materials and light industry products³. Importantly, these industries are most liable to EU anti-dumping

³ Interestingly enough, this was a general pattern in CEECs' foreign trade in the Communist period. The situation changed dramatically with the systemic change: e.g., nearly a half of Hungary's exports consists of high technology products, up from just several percent two decades ago.

rules, and CEECs' accession may jeopardize Belarus exports to these countries. European investments in Belarus are conspicuous for their virtual absence, itself the consequence of anti-market policies of the Belarusian authorities who block FDIs in principle. Thus, as of today, Belarus is targeted by economic interests of Europe only as a transit corridor for Russian oil and gas. Such a situation was not always the case. In the early 1990s, Belarus trade links were almost equally balanced between Europe and Russia. European companies did express interest in investing in Belarus, and several projects of pan-European corporations (IKEA, Philips, or Volkswagen) have recently failed due to Belarusian authorities' anti-market policies. Thus, considerable time will be needed to close the economic gulf separating Belarus from Europe. The first step to this end should be to pursue economic reforms in Belarus itself. Only once the Belarusian economy is restructured according to market principles, will it be possible to envisage approximation of the economic model, legislation, etc., towards European standards.

The Belarusian economy is destined for reform, regardless of whether the ruling elites understand the call. Reforms are unavoidable due to un-sustainability of the present-day economic model in the long run and rapidly changing external setting. In the latter aspect, of most importance is the changing context of Belarus-Russia relations which wipes out prospects for a continuous smooth functioning of an unreformed economy merely by supplying cheap raw materials and maintaining other forms of subsidies. Another important factor is in growing competitive pressures on domestic and foreign markets and challenges spurred by EU enlargement and future WTO accession of neighboring countries along with Belarus itself. Belarus will thus have to face the choice similar to one made earlier by CCEEs. The choice is between liberal Western-style and the oriental 'Byzantine' market model. The political and civilizational future of Belarus will largely depend upon which choice is made. EU support for future reforms in Belarus will be helpful in enforcing its European course of development.

Transformation of the political culture and mass consciousness in the Belarusian society

The failure of initial attempts at democratic transition in Belarus in the early 1990s was largely pre-destined by the lack of social acceptance of changes and resistance to change in customary lifestyle, including the traditional relations between the State and society. The last decade was a period of a most profound social evolution, the revisiting of old dogmas, a painful yet inevitable eradication of Soviet-era lifestyle, and learning about the consequences of the society's sovereign choice made in July 1994. The Belarusian society is gradually dropping its anti-market stereotypes, recognizes the importance of democratic institutions, changes its ideas about the role of the State, and becomes more accepting of income inequality and more tolerant towards differences of opinion. These processes have accelerated over the last few years. This can be portrayed by changes in political orientations that have cropped up in less than two years since the presidential elections of 2001. As shown, the Belarusian society is changing its value orientations against the pressure of the authoritarian system that underlines its current state.

Table 17. Change in Political Orientations Between the Presidential Elections of 2001 and Local Elections of 2003

	Prefer a future president to be (summer 2001)	Prefer a local councilor to be (Fall 2002)
A supporter of market economy	54.0	67.3
A supporter of command economy	24.1	23
A supporter of division of powers	41.1	54.2
A supporter power concentrated in one hand	34.0	38.5
A supporter of independence	37.5	40.9
A supporter of union with Russia	44.7	51.5
A supporter of policies carried out by President Lukashenka	32.6	9.7
A supporter of radical departure from the policies of President Lukashenka	49.0	83

Source: Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies

Transformation in the collective mind takes place owing to and – simultaneously – in spite of the authoritarian regime. ‘In spite’ because citizens face the State propaganda machinery making every effort to freeze the society in conditions that enabled the authoritarian rule. An, ‘owing to’ because Belarusians could learn about alternatives to democracy from their own experience and compare their initial expectations to the reality in which they have been forced to live.

Democratization of the political culture is an indispensable pre-requisite for political democratization and Europeanization of Belarus. The ongoing processes of social and cultural change give ground to moderate optimism in spite of the general gloomy picture of political developments in the country. These processes, however, have not reached a critical point of no return beyond which the perceived necessity of changes may spur citizens to act so as to completely achieve them. Firstly, the social foundation of authoritarianism, albeit shrinking, is still sizeable (according to the polls, it is still as much as 20–30% of the society). Secondly, adherence to market and democracy, however declared by majority, still represents wishful thinking, a ‘yes’ for an appealing image of a prosperous and civilized European life, rather than their acceptance as fundamental values for which a price should be paid. Thus, a large part of the society, while declaring positive attitudes towards free market, still wants the State to regulate prices. Likewise, for many Belarusians, acceptance of democracy coexists with a desire for a strong leader capable of executing the necessary reforms single-handedly and changing their lives for the better. This ‘split mind’ may be easily accounted for given that social change processes can only be gradual and incremental in nature. Undeniably, however, these processes are unfolding in Belarus.

This social evolution was largely enabled by the fact that, throughout all these years, Belarus was not separated by an iron curtain from European and global developments. Thus, as official statistics claim, at least one in three Belarusians travels abroad each year. Ca. 40% of Belarusians traveled outside of the CIS in the last decade. Even though for many foreign travel was limited to a short shopping trip to Poland, this alone made an impact on the collective consciousness. The new experience spawned a more critical view of the official propaganda and its

staunch efforts to portray a gloomy picture of failed reforms in neighboring countries, and support for political and economic alternatives to the regime. This is particularly true for the younger generation that is largely free from totalitarian dogmas and supports the European-bound course of development in Belarus. Opportunities to travel, work and study abroad and communicate with friends and partners over the internet have played an important role even if in short supply vis-à-vis the peers from Ukraine or Russia. A new 'paper curtain' between Belarus and the EU upon the introduction of a visa regime with new member states may slow down or even reverse those essential processes.

National and European identification

Democracy cannot exist without a *demos*. This being said, the feeling of common destiny and solidarity, a foundation of national identity are a necessary pre-condition for aspirations to emerge towards building democratic institutions in a society. The Belarusian society suffers not so much from the lack of recognition as a nation and a people as the lack of common understanding of what Belarus and the Belarusian people are. National identity is a developing and consolidating process currently underway in Belarus, even in spite of the official politics of denationalization. The situation, however, is far from being certain, and processes of formation of national self-identification can still take different forms depending upon societal and elite choices. Belarusian national ideology, as developed by the national-democratic counter-elite, is rooted in the belief that Belarus is historically part of the European civilization. Meanwhile, alternative schemes of self-identification based on the ideas of pan-Slavism and Soviet conservatism not only question the existence of the Belarusian nation as such, but also sternly deny it being part of Europe. That is why Belarus's choice 'for' or 'against' Europe by and large depends on an even more important choice for the Belarusian society: one 'in favor' of its own statehood and national identity, or assimilation through integration with Russia.

The controversial condition of the Belarusian society is best characterized by a deep cleavage, as roughly equal parts of it perceive themselves either as

a separate nation or as part of an East-Slavic tri-unity (49% and 42%, respectively, according to a 1999 poll)⁴. Also, pro-Russian sentiments are very strong in Belarus (about half of the population are in favor of a union with Russia despite most preferring a loose confederation). Meanwhile, only a quarter would concur to surrender national independence in favor of the union with Russia, and more than two thirds are in favor of preserving the independent state of Belarus. Overall, the Belarusian society at the same time supports mutually exclusive projects concerning its future. On the one hand, this reflects the strength of stereotypes enforced by the ruling elites (such as that one can simultaneously preserve independence and integrate with a union state). On the other hand, the society demonstrates lack of the necessary will to make a tough choice: support for any project fails once the price to be paid for its implementation is quoted.

The same characterizes public attitudes towards European integration. The general public is strongly positive about the EU. Ca. 60% of the population would support Belarus membership in the Union (only 11% were against in 2003). This is more than public support for integration with Russia. Germany and Poland top the list of countries whose political and economic models Belarusians would wish to emulate (Russia is not even present on the list). This, however, seems to be akin to the initially unswerving support for EU membership in CCEEs in the beginning of their integration process. The EU was perceived there (as is now in Belarus) as an area of prosperity and stability. Public enthusiasm, however, fell considerably once the real-life costs of integration became obvious to the societies whose countries were front-runners in the accession race. As a result, the EU membership referenda in many CCEEs showed a remarkably low voter turnout, which partly reflected public disillusionment with the idea. It is highly questionable whether Belarusians would maintain their optimism about the EU once they encounter difficulties of the integration process in real life. But, pro-European attitudes may be expected to strengthen over time once the processes of social and generation change develop. Nowadays, Belarus is entering a period of competition between ideas and visions of the future. This competition can still be

⁴ A. Vardamatski, *Belarus i svet* [in:] „Belaruskaja Perspektyva” no. 9 (2000), p.7.

won by advocates of European integration. Forces inside and outside the country interested in such outcome have the potential to enforce such victory.

The civilization choice of the Belarusian society will also greatly depend upon the elite's choice and its ability to build consensus around the mainstream direction of the country. Nowadays, the Belarusian elite, including its official and counter-elite segments, is too deeply divided to find such consensus. The official elite is under complete control of the presidential authority, whereas the counter-elite is forced to retreat to a 'parallel' society. The elite's preferences, however, are an important factor on the premise that they would impact political processes in the event of a possible democratic transition in Belarus. Pro-European orientation is dominant among the counter-elites and is accepted by a part of the ruling elites (which still have to obey the official politics in their daily decision making).

Pro-Russian sentiments, however, have strengthened among the elites since the appointment of Vladimir Putin as new president of Russia. Putin's rapprochement with the West is seen by many as a chance for Belarus to break out of the autarchy and isolation with the help of the Eastern neighbor. Consequently, the catchphrase 'Towards Europe with Russia' is being actively publicized in Belarus along with the idea that integration with Russia may solve all Belarus' problems, including the deficit of democracy and international isolation. This proposition is strengthened by surveys that show public acceptance of the idea that Belarus's route to the West leads via Moscow (thus, the number of those wanting to integrate with Russia and the EU simultaneously is on the rise together with the growing popularity of Putin in Belarus). Public opinion stereotypes (such as the claim that it is possible to join Russia and EU), however, may not substitute objective reality which exists regardless of whether the society likes it or not. It is true that, nowadays, Russia is much closer to Europe than Belarus in the political or economic sense. At the same time, Russia undeniably and steadily approaches its limit beyond which further institutionalization of its EU relations is not possible even in the long run. Thus, the prospect of EU accession has been ruled out by EU leadership itself. Russia's hypothetical membership in the Union would transform it from European into a 'Eurasian' Union

at least in the political, if not economic sense, and there is little evidence that the EU itself would ever be ready for such transformation. One should not forget that Russia's recent rapprochement with the EU was enabled not so much by its progress in democratization and enforcement of human rights, as by the fact that the West chose to ignore some of the most obvious problems in these areas out of consideration for political rationality. The transfer of Russia's 'guided democracy' model to Belarus does not guarantee that democratic institutions would take roots in the latter even to the extent in which they are developed in Russia. Russia's own experience showed that, within its overall political model, there are a sufficient number of pockets of bureaucratic feudalism ruled by local petty dictators, and Belarus may well turn into one more of these. Besides, in the past several years Russia has not shown interest in inducing Belarus to accept even this deficient model of democracy. There are even fewer reasons to think that it will push Belarus towards integrating with Europe. Hence, Belarus's route to Europe via Russia would be very short, and it will effectively deny its chance for a European future. Unification with the Eastern neighbor within the Russia-Belarus union will strike the issue off the agenda, as it will be solved exclusively in the context of Russia-EU relations of restricted scope due to Russia's Eurasian status. Despite Russia's recent rapprochement with the EU being a very positive development, it should be used as an opportunity for European integration of Belarus rather than as an excuse for a final and irreversible eradication of its statehood. A deep crisis in the Russia-Belarus union triggered off by incompatibility of the two countries' political and economic systems opens new opportunities for Belarus. Excluding the loss of political sovereignty it preserves its chances to become part of Europe one day. The Belarus-Russia integration has not developed so far as to completely deny such an opportunity. For example, the volume of Russia's investments in Belarus is over three times less than in Lithuania, a country about to become an EU member. Moreover, it has become obvious by the end of 2003 that all meaningful integration initiatives within the Russia-Belarus union (such as a common currency, privatization, or adoption of a joint constitution) have failed. Thus, Belarus has not made its ultimate geopolitical choice, and it can still be made in favor of the EU.

Variable geometry

To sum up the discussion of pre-requisites for Belarus's European integration, a paradoxical conclusion may be drawn. The pre-requisites are shattered by policies of the authorities, yet re-created in the long run by the logic of social change that cannot be reversed by political resistance. Positive pre-requisites do exist inside the society that has become more accepting of the democratic values, and shows interest in moving towards Europe, and among a large part of the pro-European elites. Uncertainty of the country's political future is the main negative factor other than its current condition. However, uncertainty has to do not with the prospect of political change per se, but rather its direction. Once again, if the declared goals of the new EU neighborhood policy are taken seriously, they can only be fulfilled once new neighbors are being closely engaged and integrated.

Europe and Belarus: from past to future

A brief overview of relations

Suggestions for the EU strategy towards Belarus should be preceded by the analysis of the current state of relations. The development of Belarus' relations with the EU, and in a broader sense with European supranational institutions, has been determined by Belarus' internal political developments of the last decade. Proclamation of independence in 1991 and the following brief period of political democratization and openness established a favorable environment for building ties between Belarus and the European institutions. Within a short period of time, the country became member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and was granted observer status in the Council of Europe (CoE). Signing the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with the EU in 1994, and a trade agreement in 1995 promoted political and economic ties between Belarus and the EU. Overall, however, the mutual lack of interest in closer relations kept a fairly low profile for Belarus-EU relations, which did not de-

velop sufficiently to allow the Union to become a dominant foreign player that could affect the internal political and economic processes in Belarus.

Soon afterwards, relations froze to the point of non-existence. Belarus's slide into authoritarianism, beginning with the election of Alyaksandr Lukashenka to president in 1994, put the contacts on hold in virtually every aspect. Belarus found itself in international isolation. To some extent, this has been purposefully sought by Minsk officials. Belarus was denied entry into CoE in 1995 due to undemocratic parliamentary elections that took place that year. Deterioration of human rights practice caused partnership and trade agreements to freeze in 1996. After the dismantling of democratic institutions and establishment of a personal presidential autocracy in the 1996 constitutional referendum, Belarus lost its observer status in CoE in 1997. Belarus-EU relations were effectively frozen. The EU policy towards Belarus in 1997–1999 generally followed the strategy of selective engagement pursued by the United States. This policy foresaw isolation of the 'official' Minsk and developing contacts with the civic society. The policy of isolation was unsuccessful and, to a large extent, served to consolidate the authoritarian system in Belarus, whose authorities which saw trade, cultural, and human ties with the West as potentially subversive for the existing political system. This is why a policy of self-isolation was actively pursued by the authorities themselves, as exemplified by the 'sewage war' in 1998, when Western diplomats were scandalously evicted from their residences, following which bilateral ties were frozen for almost a year. A narrow window for contacts was preserved through the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) opened in 1997 following unprecedented political pressure on Minsk. AMG activities, however, were sabotaged under the excuse of the opposition interfering with domestic political affairs. As a result, the group was ousted from the country in 2001–2002. A new mission was admitted in 2003 with a severely restricted mandate. Curtailed political relations hampered the development of contacts with the Belarusian society as well. Thus, the TACIS program was suspended in 2002 due to withdrawal of tax-free status of funds allocated for its purposes. A consistent refusal to reconsider the issue leads one to conclude that this is being done on purpose.

The practice of implementing TACIS programs and their practical impact deserve particular attention. Between 1991 and 1999, 56 million Euros were granted to

Belarus in this form of assistance. Out of this, 51 million was allocated before 1996. Only Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan received less financing. Additional 5 million Euros were committed in 2000 under the civic society support program⁵. Thus, a paltry 10 million Euros was expensed after Belarus' retreat to authoritarianism, in the time when it was most needed. Remarkably, even those programs had considerable impact and helped to build bridges between Belarus and Europe. Successful projects included the Belarus Economic Trends project that allowed to create an intellectual community of market-oriented economists; the Center for European Documentation in Minsk that promoted European studies in Belarus; the launch of MBA programs at the Belarusian State University and the Institute for Privatization and Management; institutional twinning programs between Belarusian and Western universities. In a rather absurd fashion, such programs are being curtailed as part of the strategy to pressurize the Belarusian authorities.

The political vacuum in Belarus-EU relations is exacerbated by the lack of conceptual approaches and strategies that could allow a change in the situation for better. Nowadays, the EU implements a step-by-step strategy that foresees enhancement of ties with Belarus in response to practical steps of the Belarusian authorities towards political liberalization and improvement of the human rights climate. This strategy is slightly different from the selective engagement policy that completely isolates the 'official' Minsk and limits contacts with the civic society and the opposition, which still epitomizes the US strategy. Both approaches, however, have been equally unsuccessful to date. Paradoxically, they are built on the same logic. The first foresees denial of advantages and privileges to the official authorities that they supposedly sought to obtain. The second offers these privileges on certain conditions. Both, however, overestimate the actual value of this advantages and privileges for the Belarus government. An important difference between the two strategies is only in the fact that the first one sees its major partner in political opposition while the second offers some room for cooperation with the authorities. The selected engagement strategy, however, worked to motivate the retreat of the opposition to the parallel society and created little motivation for it

⁵ See: K. Charman, *Belarus: The Foreign Aid Dilemma* [in:] *EU and Belarus: Between Moscow and Brussels*. London: The Federal Trust, 2002, p. 387–406.

to seek broader appeal and receive support from the society at large. As for the step-by-step approach, all that the official Minsk has to do in order to sabotage this policy and reduce EU influence to a minimum is to do nothing. Moreover, as the Belarusian authorities are the only ones to take steps in the opposite direction, the EU reduces its presence in Belarus; hence, this policy becomes counterproductive and contributes to strengthening authoritarian tendencies in Belarus. Thus, curtailing technical assistance programs automatically narrows down the circle of intellectual and business contacts of the civic society, forward-looking representatives of the state apparatus and business and academic communities. This caused damage not to the authorities who lost several hundred thousand Euros in hypothetical tax revenue, but to the reform-minded circles in Belarus. Here, worthy of mention are the usual comments of Western policy-makers who declare that progress in relations with Belarus is impossible as far as Belarus isolates itself. One can agree with such approach only if 'Belarus' is understood as a couple of dozens of protagonists of the political regime, or it is taken for granted that their policies reflect the will of all citizens of the country. Since such an approach is profoundly mistaken, the policy of 'isolation because of self-isolation' reflects the lack of interest and solidarity with those in Belarus who work for a democratic and European future of the country.

In conclusion, both strategies foresaw partnership and engagement only with selected parts of the Belarusian society (either the opposition or the authorities). No strategy, however, can be implemented without active engagement of the Belarusian society at large. That is why, so long as external players such as the EU do not pursue direct interference with Belarusian domestic politics on the part of any political force, the most fruitful form of engaging Belarus would be to work towards building pre-requisites for political, economic, and social change. The logic of such approach is simple: helping to change the world view and way of life of ordinary Belarusians, helping them to discover Europe and to develop European identification would work towards stimulating societal demand for changes. Interpreting this as a sign of lenience towards the political regime and its legitimization would be by all means irrelevant only because the implementation of such a strategy would require developing contacts with government.

An important element of such approach is to intensify non-politicized economic, social, cultural and educational programs beyond the usual coupling of ‘government vs. the opposition’. It is hard to imagine that the EU or any other external player would be able to come up with the financial and logistic capacity to reach out to every citizen of Belarus. What is suggested instead is a system of capacity building projects aimed at developing the expertise, the intellectual and business potential of professionals, academics, journalists, businessmen, and economic policy makers at the mid-level, i.e. all those who would become future policy- and opinion-makers and become leaders of a future democratic transformation. The potential return on such investments may be of enormous importance for the future of Belarus.

Rapprochement strategy: a preview

As mentioned above, it would be completely short-sighted to presume that the Belarus’ transition to democracy is impossible in the foreseeable prospect; hence, the current state of EU-Belarus relations would be frozen for indefinite time. Can the EU support processes of democratization and Europeanization of Belarus, and if so, how? In answering this question, a cautiously optimistic scenario may be accepted that presumes that a political change occurs in Belarus within the current decade. If European integration of Belarus is the ultimate goal of the rapprochement strategy, it is possible to foresee three periods of its implementation. The first would span from now until the moment of democratic transition, during which efforts should focus on establishing the pre-requisites for democratic changes in Belarus. The second period would continue from the moment of transition until the time when political and economic changes are consolidated. Assistance to reforms would then be aimed to bring Belarus to compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. Finally, the third period is integration per se.

Until democratic institutions are fully restored in Belarus, the best way the EU can help is to support the ongoing social trends that would make democratization irreversible in future. Furthermore, it is important to maintain those currently existing business, human, civic society and intellectual contacts, as well

as trade links and cross-border co-operation that could be endangered in the course of EU enlargement.

Contacts with the official Minsk should be based on a pragmatic approach that would avoid further antagonism and isolation of Belarus. Political discrepancies should not be an obstacle for cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as security, combating crime, drug and human trafficking, etc.

Meanwhile, the development of human, educational, cultural and scientific ties is hardly possible without some degree of cooperation or even involvement of the Belarusian authorities. Since the potential impact of broadening such contacts may be highly beneficial, compromises may be acceptable. Otherwise, when such attempts are straightforwardly resisted, some projects may be implemented in neighboring countries. Notably, a number of non-governmental organizations in Poland, the Czech Republic and other CCEEs have already been actively working in this direction. Their support would be an important element of the EU-Belarus policy.

Broadening contacts with Belarusian elites through capacity building projects involving mid-level government officials and relatively autonomous segments within the state (such as independent parliamentarians or local councils) may be another promising avenue to pursue. Such contacts may be implemented through educational programs, study visits, discussion forums or professional development programs.

The development of economic ties between the EU and Belarus is a key factor that can involve Belarus more closely in pan-European processes and increase the mutual interest in integration. Trade relations may be greatly enhanced once Belarus accession in the WTO is supported, as it will remove a number of problems in bilateral relations, such as anti-dumping disputes. Another important element of economic co-operation is the support for small and medium-sized enterprises in Belarus, assistance for Belarusian businesses in networking with European partners, and assistance to European business penetration into Belarus (for example, through existing free economic zones).

Rapprochement of Belarus with Europe would be impossible unless human ties, cultural contacts, and information exchange are fostered. Given that the

Belarusian authorities make every effort to limit citizens' contacts with the outside world and restrict access to information, it is essential to continue developing educational programs, courses, support libraries and information and research centers, support pro-European civic initiatives, broaden their cooperation with educational and intellectual communities in the West.

Cross-border cooperation, including the development of Euro-regions, is another important facet of the human dimension of the European strategy towards Belarus. Liberalization of visa and migration regimes in border regions would help to preserve longstanding human ties. It would be reasonable to introduce experimental mechanisms of temporary employment in cross-border regions in order to minimize the problem of illegal migration. Development of transport and tourist infrastructure in cross-border regions may be a promising trend in regional co-operation.

The last, but not least important element of the short-term strategy is the support for the civic society in Belarus and its cooperation with the European NGO sector, as well as support for independent media, especially in publicizing the EU. Implementation of such projects would require renewed and enhanced of otherwise curtailed technical assistance and civic society development programs within TACIS, even if required some compromises such as payment of taxes. Some opportunities may also be offered via the European Democracy and Human Rights Institute, TEMPUS program, other European institutions, such as the OSCE, governmental and non-governmental foundations, bilateral assistance, etc.

Further stages of rapprochement may only be considered assuming a certain timing of the democratic transformation in Belarus. Here, we accept once again a cautiously optimistic scenario, where radical political changes can occur in this decade. The democratic transition in Belarus would create opportunities for a new beginning and new horizons in EU-Belarus relations. The experience of transition in the regions shows that the regime change per se does not guarantee sustainable and irreversible progress towards a civilized and democratic society. This being said, Belarus would face a choice of direction in both external and foreign policy, between models of democracy and the market. It

will be a choice between a Western-style liberal democracy or the 'guided democracy' similar to those existing in new neighbor countries. Belarus may finally lose its chance for a European future if processes of its transition develop according to a pessimistic scenario.

The EU will be capable of offering priceless support to Belarus by helping to develop sustainable democratic and market institutions that would ensure approximation of its political and economic systems to EU standards. This can be implemented by means of technical assistance in political and economic reforms. Of particular importance will be the expert assistance in the constitutional reform, developing new legislation regulating government activities and State-society relations (such as legislation on civil service, access to information, civilian control over law enforcement bodies, etc.) Given the legacy of the authoritarian rule, particular attention should be paid to the judicial and local government reform. Sharing the experience of CCEs that experienced similar challenges in the past will be of particular value for Belarus. Assistance to the economic reform can be of technical (expert advise in preparing privatization and sector-specific reform programs, legislative reform, etc.) and financial nature (granting safety mechanisms in the initial stage of reforms through stabilization funds, credit lines, capex loans, etc.) EU assistance would thus move Belarus closer to aligning its institutions and policy-making practices with those inside the Union.

Future Belarusian reforms should be granted political rather than mere technical support. A new perspective in strategic relations will be essential for stimulating the Belarusian society and its elites to engage in deeper and more dynamic reforms. A most vivid expression of EU support in the short run would be in liberalizing the trade and visa regime. This would help to boost public support for European integration. In longer term, this would involve determining conditions and time horizons for concluding an association agreement between Belarus and the EU. In this case, transition may be made from technical assistance programs (such as the one carried out by TACIS and international financial institutions) to programs tailored for candidate countries (such as PHARE or CARDS supporting stabilization and association agreements in the Balkans).

Finally, the third stage would lead towards institutionalizing new Belarus-EU relations and incorporating the *acquis communautaire* by Belarus. It is hard to presume now that the ultimate destination of this process will be one of Belarus' EU membership. Talk about the European integration of Belarus may be no less relevant today than contemplation of similar prospects for Central European countries fifteen years ago. However, time shifts the limits of what is feasible.

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