

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The conference on 'Belarus – our New Neighbour' held on 20 March 2004 in the Czech Senate, Prague, reflects the importance attached by new EU Central and Eastern European member states to Belarus. The conference emphasised that this ascension into the EU does not connote an abandoning of Belarus by its Central and Eastern European neighbours. Rather, such ascension may instead provide a strong position through which to effectively support democratic transition in Belarus, through increasing European awareness and interest in their new common neighbour, and through the active encouragement of EU policy towards Belarus.

This conference brought together politicians, non-governmental organisations and grassroots activists from the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Belarus. The co-operation in organising this conference between the Association for International Affairs, People in Need, and the Czech Senate highlights the extensive commitment to communication and cooperation with communities and opposition politicians in Belarus.

The conference was a time of deliberation and debate concerning the role of new member states in defining EU policy towards Belarus and its eastern neighbours in general. It was an opportunity to listen to first-hand accounts of present day Belarus from both opposition politicians and representatives of institutions of civil society; to share the experiences and advice of those countries with recent experience of democratic reform; and to discuss the most effective and suitable means through which to support the Belarusian people.

Participants in the conference helped provide an insight into the present-day deficit of democracy in Belarus. Belarusian opposition politicians and activists described the increasingly aggressive repressions by Lukashenko's regime, as well as the high level of despondency amongst the people. Yet recently formed political coalitions, combined with a growing number of young, democratically minded people elected as local representatives, provide grounds for restrained optimism. Representatives from neighbouring countries described their unsuccessful experiences with the Belarusian government, and their positive interactions with the Belarusian people. Many saw a certain semblance between present-day Belarus and their own countries under Communist rule in the 80s, and consequently stressed the collective responsibility of Eastern European countries in assisting those suffering under an authoritarian regime.

Participants maintained that the EU must work to isolate the Belarusian government without isolating Belarusian society, and debated the actions that may make this goal attainable. Many voiced the fear that any policy of total isolation may disproportionately affect the Belarusian people, and may also result in the separation of Europe into two distinctly separate systems. Of particular gravity and contention was the debate concerning the plausibility of eventual ascension by Belarus into the EU. Although many participants stressed the function of an offer of EU entry as a tool through which to counter the isolation of the Belarusian people, and to support their pro-European aspirations; others stressed the improbability of such an offer. There was unanimous agreement that new Central and Eastern European member states can play an important role in the future of Belarus, by using their experience to influence and define future EU policy towards its neighbours. By sharing their experience regarding Belarus, and their own experience of democratic transformation, new member states can improve the debate on Belarus, and thus help raise awareness throughout Europe. New member states must unite and collectively send a clear message to the Belarusian people by pressing for clear EU

strategy and a comprehensive action plan that details practical measures regarding both policy and the supporting of civil society.

Supporting institutions of civil society and political opposition was also considered as a key aspect in assisting democratic reform in Belarus. In addition to the creation of EU policy, a system of direct assistance must be created with which to support independent initiatives and the Belarusian people. Projects of practical co-operation must be substantially extended, in particular study trips and exchange programmes for students and the civil society professions, including the legal and medical spheres, NGOs and local representatives. In addition to the support of civil society institutions, some participants stressed the need for simultaneous reinforcement in the political domain. The EU must help provide the Belarusian people with the opportunity to make decisions concerning their own future, by ensuring free and fair elections, without repression, discrimination or manipulation. Achieving this requires: external election observations, support of democratic coalitions, opposition politicians and activists; and the support and reinforcement of institutions of civil society, including a free media, both externally and internally, and a self-governing legal sphere.

The level of Russian participation in the democratisation of Belarus was also extensively debated. Russian interests in Belarus, both economic and political, were dissected and analysed, as were the consequences of such interest on the country. Some participants underlined the lack of true democratic values and ideals in Russia, and consequently it's inability to participate in assisting Belarus along the road to democratic transformation. Other participants, however, emphasised that due to Russia's tight hold on Belarus, any move towards democratisation would have to be taken with Russia's consent, if not their participation. Participants also detailed Lukashenko's present uncertainty regarding unity with Russia, which may have major consequences concerning Belarus's position between East and West, and concerning Russia's attitude towards the formulation of a relationship between the EU and Belarus. Yet despite debate concerning the level of Russian participation, there was unanimous agreement that decisions concerning the future of Belarus must be made in Miensk by the Belarusian people, rather than by Moscow.

This publication consists of keynote addresses, including those by former president Václav Havel, delivered at the conference, and a summary of all sessions and discussions.