

FIRST SESSION

// BELARUS BETWEEN EAST
AND WEST?

// JAN MARIAN

Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung

Opening the first session, Mr. Marian described it as an opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues that fit under the broad title 'Belarus: Between East and West'. In particular, he introduced two fundamental areas of interest that such a title generates. Firstly, the current situation in Belarus as seen by Belarusian politicians and activists, its neighbouring countries, and its neighbour as of 1st May, the European Union, and secondly, issues generated by the extension of the EU, such as new common borders, developing European policy and contacts with the regime.

// ALES JANUKIEVIČ

Deputy Chairman, Party Belarusian Popular Front

Mr. Janukievič focused on two main issues: the political climate in Belarus, in particular detailing the creation of the 'People's Coalition 5+'; and the role of new eastern EU members in supporting a change to the political climate in Belarus, thus enabling its people to decide the political future of their country.

Mr. Janukievič briefly described Belarusian society's increasing awareness of the regime. He outlined recent opinion polls, carried out by Baltic Surveys, in which 80 % of Belarusians supported state independence, and more than 65 % would vote for joining the EU. Although support for Lukashenko was found to be only 20–25 %, support for opposition forces is of a similarly low level. As a solution to such fragmented support, Mr. Janukievič outlined the creation of 'People's Coalition 5+' that has united the five main democratic opposition political parties, plus Belarusian NGOs, trade unions and youth organisations. This coalition has created a common list of candidates for the next parliamentary elections in autumn 2004, and has also helped create regional coalitions. Mr. Janukievič was optimistic about the future of the coalition, as 'through this coalition, we believe that working together we can change the situation in our country and build an independent, democratic, strong and prosperous Belarus, a Belarus which will one day become a member of NATO and the EU'.

Mr. Janukievič discussed the central role he believed the new eastern members to the EU could play in the political future of Belarus, by encouraging both the formulation of EU strategy concerning relations with Belarus and the sending of a clear message to Belarusian society that their country may become a member of European Union, after fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. Mr. Janukievič spoke of the enhanced possibility of success that such a message would provide for the coalition.

// PETR MAREŠ

Deputy Prime Minister of the Czech Republic

Mr. Mareš broke down the theme of the session 'Belarus: Between East and West?' into three key areas: where Belarus appears to belong today; where Belarus should belong; and finally how to get Belarus to where we believe it should belong.

Taking the issue of the present political status of Belarus, as previously raised by Mr. Janukievič, Mr. Mareš stated that despite many attempts by Lukashenko to isolate Belarus from the rest of Europe, Belarus could no longer be hidden from international observation. Thanks to technical advancements, including the internet, electronic media, and possibilities for travel, Belarusians are now connected to the world.

In reference to Mr. Havel's opening comments, Mr. Mareš argued that although we must not influence the Belarusians decision as to whether they belong East or West, we must provide guidance through the sharing of our experiences of transformation. He introduced three points Belarusians must bear in mind when deciding where their future lies. Firstly, Belarus is an independent entity, and decisions about its future should be made in Miensk rather than Moscow. In addition, EU policy must isolate Lukashenko's government without isolating the Belarusian people. Therefore, connections and projects of co-operation must be maintained and built upon, such as student scholarships in the Czech Republic. Lastly, he stated that chances for inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions are not lost, despite appearances. Hope once seemed lost for Slovakia, he argued, a country that once seemed far from the possibility of democracy, yet within a few months it became a major candidate for accession to the EU.

Concerning the issue of how to reach a situation in which both the position and status of Belarus will be decided by its people, Mr. Mareš stressed the importance of unity amongst its activists, a characteristic he complemented in the formulation of the 'People's Coalition 5+'.

// DAMIAN GADZINOWSKI

Representative of Mr. Bogdan Klich, President, Institute for Strategic Studies and Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission on Foreign Affairs, Poland

Mr. Gadzinowski detailed Belarus's geo-political history of entanglement between East and West, and the country's subsequent isolation. Since Lukashenko was elected, a deficit of democracy and the breaching of human rights have caused Belarus' connections to the international community to deteriorate further, and its isolation to deepen.

The vision of integration with Russia has become Lukashenko's solution to such isolation, but contradictions have recently begun to show in the Moscow-Miensk axis. Russian interest in Belarus is both economic – in particular in adjusting the Belarusian economy to the Russian system, and political – especially in integration within the framework of the federal state. Since 2002 Lukashenko has resisted such postulates, thus fuelling the worst crisis in bilateral relations in February 2004. Mr. Gadzinowski went on to highlight that despite Lukashenko's resistance, unless he agrees to such concessions, 'he sentences Belarus to total isolation, even in regard to Russia.'

Mr. Gadzinowski agreed with other speakers on the need for a comprehensive EU policy regarding Belarus. He went on to stress that the maintenance of an independent and sovereign Belarus should be of the utmost importance to the EU, as it would play an important role in the regional stabilisation of European security system. Furthermore, forging relations with its nearest neighbours would confirm EU competence in the international arena, in which it wishes to play a greater role. New Central and Eastern EU member states must ensure that the new borderline does not become the 'boundary between western wealth and freedom and eastern poverty and despotism.' New Central and Eastern members have a special obligation to initiate Belarusian aspirations for democracy and integration, and consequently must work together to develop an Eastern dimension policy. He went on to argue that the realisation of a long term perspective regarding the admission of Belarus into the EU may provide an incentive towards democratisation and liberalisation.

Mr. Gadzinowski concluded by highlighting concrete steps to be taken with regard to promoting European economical and political standards in Belarus. In particular, he echoed Mr. Mareš's statements concerning the support of civil society, especially an independent mass media, as a precondition for a functioning democracy.

// IVANS PUNDURS

Undersecretary of State, Latvia

Mr. Pundurs outlined the ways in which benchmark policy with Miensk has so far not produced tangible results, as Lukashenko is determined to stay in power. He discussed what the European line towards official Miensk should be, and concluded that although we must have contact with official Miensk, 'our line should be firm, and there should be no illusions that without free and fair elections, and respect for human rights, there will be no change in the policy of the West'. However, the

development of a firm policy against Lukashenko will not achieve the desired result if implemented alone; rather, results are only plausible if combined with support of civil society and political forces.

Mr. Pundurs highlighted an alleged contradiction between support to civil society and support to ‘freedom fighters’, i.e. democratic political forces, in which support to the latter is seen as less politically correct than the former. Mr. Pundurs argued that both are essential, and therefore should not be played off against one another. The struggle for freedom is political in nature, and therefore we should not be afraid to be political, and to support political parties, in addition to civil society. In particular, in the face of upcoming parliamentary elections, we must support democratic forces so that they can be stronger after the elections, rather than weaker and pessimistic as in the aftermath of previous elections.

He stressed that the EU must develop an action plan for Belarus, in which the partners for implementation on the Belarusian side are institutions of a democratic civil society rather than official authorities in Minsk. We need to make known to Belarusians what the EU could offer if democracy were in place. New member states that neighbour Belarus must make it clear that they are not indifferent to their plight. He maintained that Central and Eastern Europe is united in wishing for a stable and prosperous Belarus, and will do all in its power to achieve it. Belarus, he argued, will be a serious test for the common foreign policy of the EU, yet he was confident that Belarus would feature high on its list of priorities.

// JONAS CEKUOLIS

Head of Lithuanian Delegation to Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe, Lithuania

Mr. Cekuolis shared his experience as both a Lithuanian politician, and as the chairman of the Council of Europe’s sub-committee on Belarus, whose actions he detailed. This sub-committee was established two years ago with members from various European parliaments, and aims both to stress the necessity of implementing European standards in internal Belarusian legislation, and to encourage active cooperation with Belarusian society. Yet there has been little change in the areas of media law, the electoral code or an ombudsman for human rights. Mr. Cekuolis stressed that the October elections make this a critical year for Belarus – which is why the presence of international organisations, as well as members of the international community in Belarus for long-term electoral observation is necessary, despite a lack of formal mandates concerning this. However, he went on to voice his concerns regarding the lack of alternative information for the Belarusian people. ‘I fear that come election day, it will be unnecessary to have any major miscountings

of votes, due to an absolutely one side media, the harassment of opposition parties, the closure of human rights NGOs and the closure of newspapers’.

He agreed with Mr. Pundurs that we must push for an EU ‘action plan’ towards Belarus, one which includes small practical steps which will help the people understand better what Europe is and what it plans to do in their country. He detailed examples such as: the creation of an information centre on Belarus in one of Europe’s capitals; the opening of an information center in Miensk by the EU and Council of Europe as an additional source of European information for Belarusian NGOs and people; and joint European/Belarusian media outlets to be published in Belarus. In addition, he stressed the need for political pressure from member states, including sanctions, to send a strong signal condemning Lukashenko’s authorities, and their breaches of human rights.

// JAN MARINUS WIERSMA

Chairman, Delegation for relations with Belarus, European Parliament

Mr. Wiersma began by stating that Belarus was highly unlikely to be admitted into the EU in the near future, due to the high number of changes necessary before even credible discussion about membership may take place. There is little optimism regarding Belarus in the EU, he argued, yet nevertheless he spoke of the responsibility all countries share to address problems in undemocratic countries. The EU, he continued, is willing to cooperate greatly with regards to Belarus, as there is a strong geopolitical motive for the EU to be more active in that area. If the EU chooses not to act, and continues to strengthen the EU from inside, within five years we will have two very separate and distinct systems – the EU, which is democratic, open and free, and a closed and undemocratic system to the East. He claimed that new members of the EU would greatly improve the quality of debate due to their greater level of experience with Russia.

Mr. Wiersma echoed other speakers in stating that Belarusians must have the right to decide their own future on the basis of a free debate, in the form of free elections. A complete regime change is required, as with the present regime, one cannot expect the real opening of society or the improving of relations. He spoke of the economic impetus behind Russian interest in Belarus, but also stated that the political impetus is often overlooked – that Moscow wants to stop further enlargement of NATO and the EU. He went on to say ‘I think that there are two possible scenarios: one is the Moscow scenario where Moscow finds a suitable replacement for Lukashenko; and the other is a kind of Georgia/Serbia scenario. Whatever the final regime may be, I hope it will not be Moscow that changes the regime, but the people themselves’.

Finally, Mr. Wiersma spoke against the isolation of Belarus, and instead argued that we must work with the Belarusian opposition, engage civil society, and yet not rule out engagement with political power.

// DISCUSSION

The first session concluded with discussion of the current political climate and the EU enlargement, in particular focusing attention on: the issue of visas and access across the new European Union borders; how much it is necessary to include Russia in debates concerning the future of Belarus; the financing of civil society activities; and whether contacts and cooperation should be maintained with Minsk authorities.

With regard to the first issue, Mr. Wiersma highlighted the collective responsibility to maintain high security of the EU's collective borders, yet also detailed the European Commission's move to develop policy to facilitate cross-border traffic easier, particularly in relation to visa applications for families separated by the new borders, and for students wishing to study abroad. Mr. Janukievič also stressed that the visa question is crucial, in particular further facilitating the process of visa application for members of NGOs, youth organisations and political parties.

With regards to the second issue, there were a wide variety of views concerning the suitable level of Russian involvement. Mr. Janukievič argued that Russia cannot help bring democracy to Belarus, and that any political changes carried out by Lukashenko will be concerned merely with Russian interests rather than the promotion of democracy. Both Mr. Mareš and Mr. Wiersma questioned being able to encourage democracy without the involvement of Russia. Mr. Wiersma argued that the best, although quite unlikely, solution would be a Russia-EU combination, with Russia encouraging the opening up of the economy, and the EU on observing and transforming political conditions.

Both Rodger Potocki (National Endowment for Democracy, USA), and Pavol Demeš (German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Center, Slovakia) questioned the lack of financial support in Belarus from the European Union in comparison to the contributions made by American government and organisations. Mr. Wiersma agreed that further finances should come from the EU, but detailed the differences in European and US financial funding mechanisms which have held back higher contributions.

Mr. Cekuolis argued that when dealing with a dictator such as Lukashenko, contacts with the regime and all forms of compromise must be heavily avoided. Rather, he argued, sanctions are one of the few effective means of action. Likewise,

Mr. Janukievič stated that associations with official Miensk must be avoided, yet associations on the local level must be built upon. Mr. Wiersma argued that we must rather do all that we can to increase the number of international officials and parliamentarians going into Belarus, but stressed the need to interact with institutions of civil society rather than Belarusian authorities.

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