

SECOND SESSION

**// ENLARGED EU -
ENLARGED POSSIBILITIES OF SUPPORTING
PRO-DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN BELARUS?**

// EVA PALATOVÁ

Head of Independent Division on European Affairs, Senate Chancellery, Czech Republic

Ms. Palatová opened the second session by briefly recapping the previous discussion and highlighting that, while touched on earlier, this session will focus on the role of the European Union regarding Belarus. More specifically, the following speakers will focus on the question of what will be the impact of an enlarged EU on Belarusian politics and society and what the EU as an independent actor can do.

// PAVOL DEMEŠ

Director, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Center for CEE, Slovakia

Mr. Demeš began by stressing that it is the collective responsibility of European countries and organisations to help bring Belarus into mainstream European society. He noted that, being a representative of Slovakia, he is in a unique position to advise Belarus in democratisation efforts, as the two countries share a similar history in democratisation experiences. Slovakia, like Belarus, is a relatively young country, and for a period (1993 to 1998) had been under the yoke of a neo-authoritarian regime and for that period was therefore excluded from EU and NATO expansion. However, the efforts of NGOs in Slovakia largely contributed to reforms in the country, and helped to bring about the end of the regime in 1998. He stressed that organisations in Belarus can learn from the Slovakian experience and that there should be a free flow of exchange of ideas and experiences between Slovakian and Belarusian NGOs.

Mr. Demeš then proposed a thesis which stated that first, when recounting previous attempts and successes of democratisation, one must always recognise the support that came from various organisations and institutions (NGOs, media, etc), and secondly, that rather than exporting democracy, democratic reforms must come from within, with the support of outside assistance. He specified that the immediate goal must be to mobilize external interest in the Belarusian situation. In order to generate more interest in the region, better social, economic, and political arguments must be developed that illustrate why Belarus matters in the international arena, specifically for Europe and North America. In addition, Belarusian activists must learn how to better approach EU and US institutions, both public and private, to convince more donors from abroad to contribute to reforms in Belarus. Furthermore, the media must learn to convey more about Belarus externally aside from focusing on the psychoanalysis of Lukashenko. NGOs and other organisations within Belarus must improve communication between themselves in order to better organise and advocate their cause.

// IRYNA VIDANAVA

Editor in Chief, Studentskaya Dumka Magazine, Belarus

Ms. Vidanova stressed that in order to create an active Belarusian youth, help must be provided in order to make a change possible. Belarusian youth live in a society in which schools and universities are closed at whim by the administration, students are arbitrarily expelled, and are subjected to high levels of propaganda. While Belarusian youth do not suffer from nostalgia of the Soviet Era and engage in Western music and fashion, many young people are passive regarding politics. Most are disappointed and disillusioned, convinced that change cannot occur. Ms. Vidanova voiced her fears that if Belarus becomes isolated from the rest of Europe, this generation will be lost forever. Therefore, Ms. Vidanova stressed that external help is needed in order to encourage youth to become civically engaged. Effective European aid must be provided in order to fund and support programmes for Belarusian youth, in particular student exchanges and other short term programmes, which would enable young people to observe the opportunities available outside of their native country. Furthermore, support must be given to programmes within Belarus. Currently student programmes are very complicated and are largely unknown, and therefore unused. Lastly, she proposed that additional scholarships must be provided by the European community in order to act as insurance for youth in trouble with the government for becoming involved in activism.

She concluded by outlining three key ways in which new programmes within Belarus could be started and supported. Initially, she stressed that approval from Belarusian authorities will not be granted for programmes, and thus it is imperative that new structures of support and methods of reinforcement are created. Second, she warned against signing official agreements with universities and other institutions, largely because they are state-affiliated and therefore unreliable. Third, she stressed that the most logical place to begin is through exchange programmes involving teachers, professors, and NGOs.

// ALES MICHALEVIČ

Co-Chairman of Association of Democratic Local Deputies, Belarus

Mr. Michalevič began by focusing on the need to support local democratic deputies, and to provide them with the facilities through which they can do something positive for their local communities. Voters in Belarus, he argued, vote for candidates that seem in possession of the capacities to change the country's situation, however slight. The candidates nominated by the authorities are frequently heads

of a department of education, medicine, or local administration, or directors from a state owned enterprises, all positions that embody the tools and power needed to make changes. Opposition candidates, on the other hand, are often ordinary teachers, engineers, or are unemployed due to political repressions. Belarusian authorities have spread the opinion that the opposition can do nothing positive for Belarus, an opinion that can only be destroyed with financial support from outside. The development of Centres of European Information, as mentioned in the last session, would have a great effect on the support of democracy on the local level if established in the provinces.

Mr. Michalevič went on to express his belief in programmes of twinning and exchange, in particular concerning local officials, doctors, lawyers, judges, and school pupils, and maintained that Belarus should also be included in EU programmes concerning European regions. He described the lack of local self-governance in Belarus, and the nomination of deputies by the presidential administration. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to establish a union of towns or town council members. Consequently, programmes of direct cooperation between towns/municipalities in Belarus and Europe which encourage discussion between local administration and leaders of democratic communities have the positive effect of attracting the interest of local communities, and establishing a wide movement for self-governance.

He also highlighted the importance of supporting a free media, in particular unregistered newspapers, as he claimed that within a few years most newspapers will be unregistered. In addition, he stressed the need for FM radio broadcast from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, as it can cover more than 40 % of Belarusian territory.

// PAWEŁ KAZANECKI

President, East-European Democratic Centre, Poland

Mr. Kazanecki began by highlighting the advancing separation of Belarus from Europe, both politically and in the increasingly alienated mentality of the Belarusian public. This was described as due to three key issues: a lack of free information; limitations on travel through which to build foreign contacts in democratic countries; and the lack of political will in Western Europe to change the political situation in Belarus.

Concerning the last issue, Mr. Kazanecki insisted that new EU members must unite and work together to draw the attention of Europe to this region. The Polish government has begun this process through its recent 'non-paper concerning policy towards new eastern neighbours after EU enlargement', developed by the Polish

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He stressed the difficulty in finding states in Western Europe to support, and fund, an interest in Belarus, and appealed for a political gesture from the EU describing Belarus's potential future as a member state, as without such a political declaration, any promotion of Europe would be worthless.

New programmes and new strategies with which to support civil society in Belarus must be developed by new member states, in particular since the recent collapse of the TACIS programme in the region. A new, young, open-minded elite must be built, through the further invitation of Belarusian students to European universities, and more importantly, through the creation of mechanisms to encourage their return to Belarus. Furthermore, he argued that the lack of free information can be remedied through investment in cross-border media, specifically FM Belarus radio to be broadcasted from neighbouring countries.

Mr. Kazanecki concluded by stressing the need to avoid contact with members of the Belarusian state. The only viable cooperation can be between local authorities in European countries and local deputies in Belarus. Consequently, we must work to support unofficial, rather than official NGOs, to avoid our efforts and finances being placed in the hands of Belarusian authorities.

// DISCUSSION

The second session concluded with a discussion of the concrete measures that the EU, new Eastern and Central European member states and Belarusian activists can implement to reinforce pro-democracy activities in Belarus, in particular focusing on the importance of recognising and evaluating the relative failure of previous forms of assistance, and continuing the brainstorming dialogue concerning future projects of support and cooperation within Belarus.

Concerning the first issue, Mr. Demeš argued that there are increasingly persuasive political, moral, and security arguments regarding the need for enhanced assistance in Belarus, arguments which must be further publicised and stressed by new Central and Eastern European member states. If the EU is to take action against such a security threat, it must recognise why standard forms of assistance used in other countries are incompatible with the Belarusian situation, why numerous past projects in Belarus have been unsuccessful; and also be willing to develop new approaches and programmes. Mr. Demeš stressed the need for a holistic approach, in which there is cross-border cooperation and exchange of ideas and skills. Ms. Vidanava further emphasised this point, adding that as new member states have considerable experience in the difficulty of implementing EU programmes in

those countries outside of the EU, they can help adapt such programmes to the needs of Belarus, or assist in the developing of new strategy and programmes.

Concerning the second issue, Mr. Kastens, MP for Latvia, asked for further examples of mechanisms and instruments through which to strengthen democracy in Belarus. There was unanimous agreement that the trust of the Belarusian people can only be achieved by commitment to the continuation, and extension, of present programmes, though there was continued debate concerning the content of such programmes. Whilst some participants highlighted the need to support both civil society and democratic political opposition, others contended that previous support for political opposition has been unsuccessful, and that therefore pro-democracy programmes must be created anew. This was underlined by Mr. Jarabik (Pontis Foundation, Slovakia), who went on to argue that despite the high level of activity in Belarus by Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and increasingly Slovakia, structures of financial contribution must be formed amongst new member states, and the EU in general. This will require much political will, he argued, due to Belarus's non EU status as a developing country.

Previous successful activities were praised by all speakers, in particular the growing number of student exchanges, scholarships, and work exchange programmes. Ms. Vidanova stressed the need to assist Belarusians to travel abroad, through providing visas, and through the further extension of travel, study, and exchange programmes. Mr. Biela, MP, representative of the Polish Senate, suggested projects concerning small business exchange and border activities. In addition, he stressed Poland's interest in protecting its diaspora in Belarus, and therefore the importance of Poland maintaining a relationship with Lukashenko. This statement was criticised by Mr. Kazanecki, who argued for a more comprehensive Polish foreign policy, and stressed that the priority in Belarus must be democracy promotion rather than provisions for diaspora.