

EUROPE HAS MORE PERSPECTIVE PARTNERS IN BELARUS THAN ITS GOVERNMENT

**// EVA PAĽATOVÁ
AND LUBOŠ VESELÝ**
POLICY PAPER

With its enlargement to the east, the European Union will acquire not only new borders but also new neighbours. In the course of the last fifteen years, the western community has succeeded in stabilising states in the immediate neighbourhood to the east of the Oder and the Bavarian forest through dialogue and cooperation in

order to prepare them for membership in an integrating community. Now the – already enlarged – Union is facing the same challenge: to stabilise a new area on the east and south of its borders. Whether the community will be able to live up to the purpose of its existence ensuring to its citizens security, democratic and just government, stability and sustainable economic development, will depend largely on its ability to fulfil this aim.

The EU is aware of this and by using the methods already proven during the present enlargement process it is developing its new strategy for a so called 'Wider Europe', on the basis of which it wants to establish close cooperation with its new neighbours. It is clear and understandable that this will happen without giving these countries any hope of joining the EU-25 in the near future. The principle of the above method is simple: in exchange for respect to international commitments, human rights and the values of democracy as well as for progress in reforms (the implementation of which is generously supported by the EU), the European Union offers gradual integration into the common market including the introduction of all four freedoms of movement. The aim of this process is ambitious: to enhance stability and prosperity along the EU borders. To the east the EU concentrates mainly on the Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and also Belarus.

The key condition of any progress in relations with these countries is a constructive approach of their governments – a basic and understandable principal reflecting on all steps taken, the realisation of all programmes and use of all instruments evolving from it. The starting point for any cooperation is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Community (EC) and any given country in Eastern Europe. It is a legal frame, which in the case of Russia and the Ukraine functions as a gate for cooperation, yet in a specific situation – by which we mean Belarus – does not symbolise a gate but a requirement, which at this moment cannot be met.

With regard to the developments in Belarus after 1996, the already established Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was frozen by the EU, after which implementation of supportive programmes, designed to strengthen democracy, economy as well as civil society, were stopped. The above mentioned altered concept of 'Wider Europe' takes Belarus into account, however, only after 'the preconditions for free and fair elections are insured'. Until then, the EU will not compromise in its efforts towards achieving democratic values by supporting a regime, whose policy is not compatible with the values shared by the community.

It is clear that if the EU does not want to leave this country that lies between Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Ukraine and Russia completely to its own devices, it cannot simply 'wait and see' when or whether Mr. Lukashenko meets the set conditions – it has to start seeking ways of breaking this vicious circle. Otherwise we will continue to wait for a change that will not come by itself. We are relying on measures which count on a partner who does not cooperate, and our programmes follow

aims which look good in the overall picture (integration into the common market) but cannot at present be applied in that country.

Lukashenko's Belarus shows little interest in becoming part of the community of European democracies. The situation regarding the violation of human rights has significantly worsened in the course of the last year and there is no sign that the governing regime would be prepared to change its behaviour. Some tens of NGOs and independent media have been liquidated by the state, it can be expected that before the autumn 2004 parliamentary elections even more will be banned. On the other hand one cannot expect that these elections will be free or democratic due to the mass media and the state apparatus being under the control of the governing regime, which – similar to the countries of Central Europe before 1989 – is based on efforts to gain total control of information and politics, through both the security services and state authorities; the strict control is also implemented through schools and employers.

However, an improvement of the situation cannot be supposed even in the case members of the opposition would be elected. The power and significance of the Belarus parliament are negligible. It is obvious that it is necessary to communicate with the representatives of the current regime even if there is little hope that this might bring a change of the current situation. Official Minsk has not shown any interest in real cooperation with the European Union and, taking into account the nature and structure of the regime, one cannot expect that it ever will. The only guarantee for an improvement of the situation is the gradual and purposeful strengthening of civil society and the enforcement of principles of democracy. In this area, non-governmental organisations and initiatives as well as independent media should become the natural partners of the EU. However, the Union has not yet found a way how to cooperate with these and how to utilise their potential.

If the enlarged European Union wants to influence the developments in Belarus in order for it to become a stable country which respects the generally shared values of a rule of law and democracy, it has to abandon the strict dependence on the relations with official Minsk. Its main partners should then become those Belarusians and their initiatives, whose aim it is to bring their country closer to the democratic world. Therefore it is necessary to use existing and find new and unusual methods and instruments, which until now have not been applied. Further it is necessary to take into account that most of these organisations and initiatives in Belarus are currently forced to give up their activities within the existing legal framework and operate more and more informally.

One of the possible methods could be to grant financial support to NGOs in countries of the enlarged EU that cooperate with Belarusian partners – similar to NGOs in democratic countries who supported partners in the unfree part of Europe before 1989. As this experience showed, most effective in the support of independent initiatives would be small flexible grants, which are easy to administrate.

An appropriate instrument for its implementation could be the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which permits granting financial support without the participation and permission of the receiving country's administration. Paradoxically for the period 2002–2004 Belarus was not included in this programme.

It is also necessary to pay attention to programmes for students and young people as the mobility of youth is of extreme importance. Scholarships granted by the International Visegrad Fund could serve as an example of such cooperation. In addition, it is paramount that present projects and initiatives on the small-scale local level need to be supported, and new projects created and extended.

Another clear signal for enhanced engagement of the European Union in Belarus would be the installation of a visible and active representation of the European Union (a delegation of the EU Commission) directly in Belarus. Under the circumstances of repression and regarding the disinformation policy of the Belarusian regime towards the EU, a presentation of the principals of European policy and an active political support of democratic initiatives and individuals directly on the spot are particularly important. For objective information about the EU it is also possible to take advantage of emerging local pro-European democratic initiatives.

In regard to its relationship with a new neighbour balancing on the edge of totality, the enlarged Europe does not face the dilemma of whether to legitimise the governing regime or to leave it to its own devices. There are a number of ways and methods how to contribute to a gradual strengthening of civil society and thus also conditions for a transformation to a free and democratic country. The individual institutions of the European Union, its member countries and NGOs must, however, take an active position and take advantage of existing possibilities. Broad reflection concerning this topic is necessary especially regarding the current preparation of new instruments and financial perspectives of the EU for the years 2007–2013. If not, preserving the present approach and waiting for a positive answer from the Belarusian authorities could mean waiting for Godot.

Eva Palatová is an M.A. in international relations of the Charles University's Faculty of Social Sciences. Currently she is the Head of Independent Division on European Affairs of the Senate's Chancellery in the Parliament of the Czech Republic. She deals primarily with the integration of national parliaments into the European decision-making process and the EU's external relations.

Luboš Veselý is a B.A. in international studies of the Charles University's Faculty of Social Sciences. He works for the Association for International Affairs' Research Centre and at the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights at the People in Need. He specialises in Central and Eastern Europe.