



Policy Brief for the Roundtable Conference:

**“Democracy promotion East and South after the Arab Spring:
Re-evaluating the EU's Engagement with Authoritarian Regimes”**

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Belarus: the EU's permanent challenge

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It is admitted the East European countries have several common principal features like lack of democracy or unreformed economies that prevent them to establish closer relationship with the European Union. Unfortunately Belarus stands out even against this rather negative background representing a permanent challenge for the West. It was confirmed once again on November 24 by adjudgement to human rights defender Ales Byalyatski.

For the last 15 years the EU has undertaken a lot of the very different efforts in order to turn Belarus to the civilized way of development. Until 2008 its actions were mostly limiting and punishing. They included more than 30 condemning resolutions of the European Parliament, various restricting measures by the EU Council like imposing visa sanctions on top-ranking Belarusian officials or expelling the state from the Generalized System of Preferences etc. As well-known, it did not bring any achievements.

Then, three years ago some changes were outlined among which engaging Belarus in the 'Eastern Partnership' program was the most notable one. This policy indicated the decision to realize in practice a mechanism of maximal involving official Minsk instead of isolating it. An impression of possible unfreezing relations was created. Despite the behavior of the official Minsk clearly demonstrated lack of consistency, the West seemed to be ready to comply with Belarusian model of 'controlled democracy' considering it as a step from authoritarianism.

Of course, it would be a great exaggeration to affirm that any cardinal shifts took place in the internal policy of Belarus. At the same time there were some grounds for hopes on improvement of the situation. Surely, not because the Belarusian authorities have realized suddenly the fallaciousness of their former approaches but due to the impression that they have understood finally that while rapprochement with the West the threats to their power were much less than at continuation of one-sided orientation to Russia. In particular, it was evidenced by their stubborn unwillingness to satisfy insistent demands of Kremlin to recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Unfortunately all these efforts proved to be fruitless, too. Quite predictable rupture of cooperation with Europe has been assessed in Minsk as much less dangerous, than expanding space of liberties with subsequent losing control over society. As a result the unjustified cruel actions have thrown relations with the West back to the previous state of sharp confrontation.

Generally speaking, under today's circumstances the Belarusian regime faces the three main options in its foreign policy:

i) *Actual incorporation into Russia*. It means refusal of compromise and dialogue with the EU together with adopting Moscow's conditions – creating the united custom territory, unifying tariff and non-tariff politics, later on accepting Russian ruble as united means of payment. It also implies inevitable recognition of independence of the occupied Georgian territories.

ii) *'Controlled democracy'*. Liberation and relatively soon amnesty of political prisoners followed by renewing negotiation process with the EU. Limited liberalization for independent media and civil society structures. Holding parliamentary elections according to mixed system of voting, allowing several persons from so called 'constructive opposition' to get to the House of Representatives. Point privatization, cooperation with international financial organizations.

iii) *Self-isolation*. Strengthening confrontation with the EU and simultaneous rejecting participation in the Custom Union and Common Economic Space. Inevitable European sanctions including possible economic ones. Increasing prices on Russian energy carriers and reducing Russian market for Belarusian goods. Tremendous difficulties in external debt service with a prospect of soon default. Growing tensions in budgetary and social sphere, mass dissatisfaction of the population.

Surely none of these variants is acceptable for official Minsk per se, so it will search for their most advantageous combinations. We see that now essential steps are made in the first direction that causes quite reasonable concerns. Correspondingly the eternal question 'What to do' becomes even more vital. Sorrowfully, there is no confidence that clear and unambiguous answer exists in principle. As Foreign Minister of Lithuania Audronas Azhubalis has noticed, "should it be known how to pull Belarus out of the hole, in which it is now, it, probably, would be done long ago."

Indeed, there are no good decisions but only a choice between bad and very bad ones. In judgment of the moderate fraction of Belarusian democratic forces, to which the Movement for Freedom belongs, the European Union has to decide on three consecutive positions.

Since due to a diffuse national identity state sovereignty is still under serious threat, the European Union first of all has to determine its stand on issue of principle: to what extent it is interested in the independent Belarus.

The thing is that at the end of the day it is impossible to deny that if abstract away from the lack of democracy, today's regime did not create serious problems for the West except, probably, several cases of short-term breaking transit of Russian energy carriers. And should Belarus be under complete Moscow control such situations would be excluded.

It's a pity but last time suspicions increased that economical and political interests in the EU policy prevail over fundamental principles. In any event the signs of pacifying Kremlin became more

evident. For instance, Russia's aggression against Georgia did not prevent France from selling it a number of helicopter carriers.

Not occasionally at the recent conference in Helsinki both Russian and European democrats have urged the West to reject its shortsighted tactics of cynical deals with Kremlin: "embraces and kisses" in exchange for profitable contracts and lack of scandals.

If the EU just the same firmly holds the viewpoint that Belarus' sovereignty is worthy of protection, the second point comes: it has to sort out its objective there for the medium-term perspective: changing authorities at any cost, or democratic reforms while preserving the existing regime, or transformation of the society.

Theoretically the first goal can be attained much sooner than others by applying rigid economic sanctions. This is what Belarusian radical opposition is demanding from the EU for a long time. It considers cancelling economic interaction including closing European market for Belarusian oil products and potassium salt as the only real threat to the regime. These views are brightly demonstrated by the headline at one of their Internet sites: "Europe continues to feed the last dictatorship."

They are convinced that in the result of cutting living standard the mass will go into the streets to throw off the authorities, democracy will triumph, and Belarus will start its march to Europe.

Alas, these prognoses poorly agree with the sociological data. According to the September opinion polls, 42.0% of respondents were in favor of joining the European Union whereas 41.5% – for association with Russia. Meanwhile, in March these figures were much more favorable – correspondingly 50.5 and 31.5%. So the real influence of drastic deterioration of personal economic situation on people's moods contradicts those predictions completely.

It is evident that in this case the EU attractiveness will fall down radically since monopolistic state propaganda will not miss an opportunity to accuse it in all sins. Then, one should not forget that created redistribution system continues to provide a certain level of well-being and social protection to large groups of people. So quite likely the next demagogue will appear accusing Lukashenka in spoiling relations with Russia and promising to improve them. And it looks wholly possible that he will get quite essential public support.

But it is much more probable that Lukashenka will not wait for the surge of public anger, but simply yield the country to Moscow, bargaining himself certain personal conditions.

In all these cases one can forget about the democratization of Belarus if not forever, but for a very long time since situation in Russia in this sphere is also very far from perfect. Therefore relying upon Russia in solving the 'Belarusian question' is an utopia because its principal task differs cardinally from the European one. One more urgent recommendation is to avoid strong economic pressure (except, of course, extraordinary cases).

Achieving the second goal looks very doubtful. At least, until now the authorities have never demonstrated even minimal intention to follow this way though it is proposed by the West permanently.

Approximately the same initiative was brought forward, among others, by the President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė. Its essence is in starting with preparation to the period 'after Lukashenka' just now. According to its adherent, Jamestown Foundation's expert Vladimir Sokor, "for the moment no one group is seen that is capable to control Belarus after him. We must reach the ruling circles at present and to help them to create a competent group, which hereinafter could take responsibility not destabilizing situation in the state and without interference of Russia. It is important to provide the unity of ruling class of Belarus and not to allow Russia to split it."

Taking into consideration the population's political passivity this idea looks rather attractable since it puts Belarus' independence above all, though in this case the democratization will be postponed for indefinite period. However it is totally incomprehensible to imagine how it can be realized in practice because Belarus' nomenclature does not perceive the EU as the power capable of helping tackle the numerous economic problems. Besides that it is trembling with fear at one thought of being suspected of disloyalty.

Therefore the transformation of society and changing mentality of Belarus' citizens remains to be the only more or less realistic approach though it is a task of extreme complexity. Then the third point is to define concrete arrangements.

Of course, the West cannot compete with Russia in terms of wasting resources for Belarus' support. However there are some issues that look not calling for too large expenditures. Thus, studies show that Belarusians, who have visited the EU member states for several times, are more critical to the internal political situation and their pro-European moods have increased. Correspondingly the long-suffering simplification of the visa regime is necessary.

It is very advisable to facilitate and expand exchange not only for democratic activists but to a larger degree for ordinary people. Some analysts offer to extend these encouragements to state officials and journalists as well. Possibly, in some cases it can be justified, however usually such persons are well aware of everything, but it is senseless to expect from them even minimal actions not in line with official direction.

Among other possible measures the next ones seem to be of primary importance:

- enlarging all-round assistance to strengthening civil society;
- rendering different kinds of aid to those who have suffered from repressions;
- expanding possibilities for young Belarusians to study in the EU;
- widening providing population with objective information via electronic media.

In order to disprove official statements that nobody is waiting for Belarus in Europe it would be highly desirable to declare publicly at the EU's highest level that after fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria Belarus will be certainly accepted to the Union. Possible membership of Iceland, Norway, Switzerland or even Balkan states does not cause bewilderment or irritation, but when it comes to any Eastern partner, the syndrome of 'weariness from expansion' appears immediately.

As for the policy with respect to the Belarusian regime, it is to be recognized that there are no many direct levers to exert influence upon it, especially taking into account that the stronger will be Western pressure the closer Belarus will be to the 'bear's embraces'.

One of the few sticks is expanding largely the list of visa banned Belarusian officials by including there all persons guilty in violations of human rights.

Carrots like rendering any kind of aid at the state level can be used too but only together with strict following the fulfillment of obligations taken by Belarusian side.

In spite of all negative aspects, today's situation still does not mean ultimate giving up the ships. Belarusian authorities understand perfectly well that too close relations with Moscow will be extremely dangerous for their political future. And as their primary goal is to keep power, they will need external support and try to find some kind of balance between East and West again.

Therefore one can expect that one day we will see next attempts to return former relationship with Brussels to the status of before December 19. Within the pro-European part of Belarusian society there are high expectations for the EU's role in helping to achieve democratic changes.