

How Effective is the EU's Policy Towards Belarus?¹

The EU's policy towards Belarus has to date been largely ineffective. The lack of a clear strategy has resulted in a cooperation that tends to be either purely technical and pragmatic or has an air of arbitrariness about it. The EU-Belarus relations over the last two years can be described as an economic cooperation and at the same time as an attempt to support the cumbersome processes of change in Belarus in the long term. The Belarusian authorities use the cooperation with the EU as an example of Belarus's international progress and recognition. And yet it is difficult to spot any serious attempts of the Lukashenko government to change its approach in the areas most criticised by the EU and its member states: human rights, democratisation and civil society development. Some demonstrative steps like granting two independent newspapers access to the state-run distribution service or facilitating registration procedures for entrepreneurs are no signs of serious political changes. Is the EU's policy an adequate response to the current situation in Belarus? How can the effectiveness of the EU's policy towards Belarus be improved? What kind of strategy could the EU use to support civil society development in Belarus under the present conditions? How can the cooperation results be made sustainable?

The Current Situation in Belarus

During the last two to three years the situation in Belarus has changed. Up to the presidential elections in 2006 the feeling was that the Lukashenka regime would keep the power for a long time. Since autumn 2008, however, some unexpected changes have taken place in internal and foreign policy. For this there are four reasons: Firstly, the relations with Russia which were built on trade cooperations have deteriorated due to problems with trade and conflicts over gas. Secondly, the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008 has led to the realisation of possible threats for Belarus. Thirdly, the global economic crisis made Belarusian authorities more dependent on internal and external support. For a long time the government pretended there was no crisis in Belarus, but at the end of 2008 a devaluation took place and the authorities for the first time in history became dependent on the people, as they needed money to invest. Fourthly, the EU policy towards Belarus changed and led to an intensifying interaction and a process of negotiations.

The liberalisation announced by the authorities and the “honeymoon” between Belarus and the EU has resulted in a new situation. There is a window of opportunities for civil society. Also, some ritual and symbolic changes (release of a few political prisoners, consultative councils, distribution of two independent newspapers) have taken place and a democratic imitation and simulation process is going on (e.g. an increase of “GoNGOs”). But there is non-transparency and a hidden agenda on the side of the Belarusian government in the sense that Belarusian society

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does not know the content of the Belarus-EU negotiations and that the Belarusian authorities use the expanded relations with the EU for their own pragmatic aims, i.e. avoiding significant change and keeping the power.

Participation and a growing role of civil society in the transformation process are key factors for sustainable changes in Belarus. In previous and current EU programmes there is a trend towards a “service provider” approach. In order to strengthen the role of civil society in Belarus and make changes sustainable, this should change to a “democratic co-actor and policy co-maker” approach. Also, an EU strategy towards Belarus should not aim to award or punish the Belarusian regime. It should be proactive and long-term oriented in order to initiate sustainable changes in Belarus. The Eastern Partnership should be this pro-active strategy. It must deepen the liberalisation process in Belarus. Civil society participation depends on the EU strategy.

For the latest ten years, the EU-Belarus dialogue has been very bad. The relations between both actors are insignificant. The Belarusian regime is mainly to blame, but the responsibility has to be shared by both sides. Neither the EU nor its member states (Germany, France, UK) have been very active. There is an explanation for this low level activity. Since the nineties Germany and others considered Belarus as part of Russia’s sphere of interest. This idea has been responsible for the doctrine the EU has been guided by in recent years. So far all EU programmes have been inefficient. During all these years Belarusian civil society has neither developed nor gotten stronger – on the contrary. This means that if the programmes do not change fundamentally, the increase of financial support for these programmes alone does not lead to an increase of their efficiency.

Change of Attitude Towards Belarus

There were two „local doctrines” about the support of Belarusian civil society: the doctrine of Michael G. Kozak, US-Ambassador to Belarus (2000-2003) is restricted to the support of radical opponents of the regime and diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime through sanctions. It can not be fully implemented, first, because it is virtually impossible to motivate the international community for consistent and consolidated sanctions, even against very dangerous and aggressive regimes, let alone Belarus. Secondly, any foreign support for the radical opposition is easily neutralised by an authoritarian regime. Radical opposition cannot survive without support by the rest of the population.

Then there is the doctrine of Hans-Georg *Wieck*, who headed the OSCE mission in Belarus between 1997 and 2001. The cornerstone of this doctrine has been a negotiation process, with as key partners the Belarusian government and public organisations and political parties brokered by the European institutions. The most serious attempts to organise such a dialogue in the years 1999 -2000 were ignored by the majority of the opposition parties and politicians who favoured the Kozak approach. In subsequent years, the Belarusian civil society and the political opposition in particular became so weak that it cannot be a party in the negotiation process, even with the most intensive and extensive support by all of the European institutions.

Still, it has to be said that there were many shades in between the *Wieck* and the *Kozak* doctrine. It is a fact that all actors have to deal with the regime, but you can differentiate the tone you use towards non-governmental actors and the government. The tone is extremely important. The EU has to adapt itself in that respect. The neighbouring countries with a communist past can understand the situation in Belarus

much better. On the other hand, one has to ask oneself what of the experiences in those countries can be transferred to the situation in Belarus. Belarusian civil society is looking for a way to force the regime to a dialogue. This is different from the situation in Ukraine.

In the following years the political opposition in Belarus has become so weak that it cannot act as participant in any negotiations even if the EU institutions support it extensively. Europe's attitude and the "local doctrines" appear to be inefficient. Now is the time for new ideas and new programmes. These should not be developed by political scientists of the European think tanks, but should involve the most active parts of the intellectual forces in Belarus themselves. Europe also needs new ideas and concepts in order to continue its process of democratisation and reform in the new post-communist countries and in order to develop its neighbourhood policy. The Eastern Partnership can be a platform for development of new ideas and a new doctrine.

Programmes are tools with which the EU implements its policy towards a country. Belarus is not a country with problems: it *is* a problem, but it is a *European* problem. All post-communist European countries passed through the phase Belarus is in right now and made their choices. Now Belarus has to make a choice. If the intention is to make Belarus a European country, Belarusian civil society and the EU have to do this together. There are actors inside the country who have certain agenda's and goals and who need help and investment from the outside. Belarus has to establish its identity. Most of the Central European countries were countries who really wanted to be in the European Union, but it is unclear what Belarusian society really wants.

Towards New EU Programmes for Belarus

In the nineties there were two European programmes for Eastern Europe: Tacis and Phare. These programmes had different aims. All countries that participated in Phare are now EU members. Those who participated in TACIS are outside. If we see Belarus outside the EU or as a part of Russia then exactly that will happen. Both sides have to define what they want to do with Belarus. Is the newly established Eastern Partnership a goal or a tool and, in the latter case, for what? All this has to be perfectly clear; otherwise we cannot define programme indicators or criteria. We cannot evaluate how far we are on our way to success if we have not defined what success means. New EU programmes have to be based on adequate knowledge and realistic assumptions. So far this has not been the case: they do not take into consideration what actors there are in Belarus. Belarusian society is approached according to models which are designed in Western Europe. There are e.g. no local authorities which meet that criterion of local authorities as defined in the West. The EU makes programmes to support non-governmental actors, but there, again, is nothing that meets that criterion. Nothing is known on the social structure of Belarus: it needs to be researched. Without this knowledge it is impossible to draw up effective programmes.

Belarus is a post-soviet country with specific phenomena and characteristics. People in the Soviet Union used to live in simulation. It helped them to survive. Authorities can create anything: elections, courts...but these are empty shells. European programmes often helped to build up these simulations - for anyone outside Belarus it is difficult to distinguish between real and fake. Those who can pay can create results, but it does not mean anything. Issues like gender or AIDS or climate change can easily be picked up without having the slightest impact. The results of the programmes are not sustainable because they are either not real or because they are

achieved without developing the proper institutions - it is assumed that these institutions exist. A new approach, a new programme, a new doctrine for Belarus has to be developed based on real knowledge of the situation. Only that can lead to success.