

9. What do you think of the European Union's policies with regard to Belarus?

Volha Abramava

The European Union does not understand what is going on in Belarus. It simply does not understand! The EU's policy regarding Belarus is molded here, not in the EU. It is shaped by those opposition groups that have long occupied a certain political niche and turned politics into business. Actually, these opposition groups are not interested to see democratic change and free market economy in Belarus, despite a hue and cry, loud words and political statements. Neither are they interested in an end to Belarus' isolation and the establishment of solid contacts between the country and the West. They are uninterested because they feel quite comfortable in the existing situation. I am not talking about all opposition groups but only about some of their leaders. I can cite another examples.

Belarus is a small country. We all know that in any profession, be it journalism or political analysis, there are craftsmen and apprentices. We also perfectly know what people here in Belarus live for. One can use most beautiful words to say about their love for the country and democratic values but be no patriot and democracy advocate and act to achieve their own ends only.

I will repeat once again. The European Union, as well as the United States that I respect both, hold us in contempt and do not want to take pains to

offer a viable form of cooperation. I repeatedly told our European partners in public: 'People, why do you behave in an odd way when attacking Belarus? If you want a donkey to go you should dangle a carrot in front of him instead of giving him a stick. Let us try differently. Offer us something concrete, pragmatic and weighty. I above all mean something material. The Belarusians are a very pragmatic nation. They will think and probably accept something what will not be a sop... I understand that it is impossible today, but then you should ask economic experts how much Belarus' transition to market economy will cost. You can still offer installments! You can bring us in the European community in this way'.

I have a strong suspicion that even the Belarusian authorities will not turn down an offer that will be about something substantial. They share basic values with all of us – they are also pragmatic and think about profit. Do it like that! Attacks do not produce results but prompt the opponents to stand firmly their ground, grow stale, regard the entire world as an enemy and unite people around this belief. It does not have prospects any longer to follow this 'vicious' path. I have always been saying that sanctions against Belarus are counterproductive and have a negative effect in terms of politics.

Yauhen Babosau

If we speak about Russia's two-sided policy toward Belarus, the European Union has a one-sided policy of Belarus' non-recognition. But this is not about economy, this is pure politics. Its negative attitude toward the Belarusian leadership spreads to the Belarusian people, unfortunately. This is done not by the entire EU, but only by those EU leaders that are members of the OSCE, etc. As for the European Union, the European Parliament, opposition figures are invited there, let them do it. This is their business.

I think that it is he who is elected by the people who has prospects. And it is the people's business whom to elect: number one, number two or number 15 – this does not matter. I repeat once again that remaining what we are is

what matters most. And only when we stay true to ourselves, we will stay in Europe. As soon as we start obeying someone, grovel to somebody, we will be simply trampled underfoot.

Anzhalika Borys

The EU's policies with regard to Belarus lack consistency, although awareness of the problem deepened and became more sincere through efforts of Poland and other new members.

Henadz Buraukin

I am not sure that the EU pursues any policy with regard to Belarus. It may pursue some policy, but it is not serious. I have an impression that the EU does not understand what is happening in Belarus. It takes its standards and applies them to Belarusian realities. Attempts by high-level European officials to promote standards of democracy and free elections seem ridiculous to me. Their ideas are good, but the officials do not understand that they cannot be implemented in Belarus. The top-level EU leadership does not seem to be aware of and understand the real situation in Belarus. On the one hand, the EU is willing to support the democratic process in Belarus, but on the other it fails to take concrete action. Sometimes its steps come too late; sometimes it is inconsistent or pretends as if nothing is happening.

The travel ban on officials and other similar steps cannot drastically change the situation in Belarus. These are moral actions, not organizational or political.

Ales Byalyatski

The EU's policies and strategy determine to a considerable degree the policies of neighbors with regard to Belarus. The EU finally has begun to treat Belarus as a neighbor it has to deal with.

EU policies are improving. Although the policies are not 100 percent perfect, considerable changes for the better have been observed in the last two years. It is our duty to make the EU aware of problems in Belarus. It should be aware that Belarus could join the EU when these problems are sorted out. It is like residents of the same village team up to repair a decrepit house. The EU should view Belarus as part of the European space and European community. We have very much in common with the European community. We do not even realize how much we have in common. Take, for instance, a thousand-year old female jewelry. Norwegian women wore jewelry that was 80 percent identical to pieces found in the Vitebsk region, which means that trade was very intensive and merchants accompanied by wives were shuttling between these ancient countries. Nobody thought at the time that the ties could be disrupted. I would like us to be as close as before.

Pavel Daneika

I think there is no real policy. The European Union is in total confusion because Belarus contrasts sharply with everything it has along its border. The EU absolutely does not understand what to do with this. And it does not understand Belarus' role in the region. It does not understand what an ideological impact the Belarusian situation has and how developments in the country may affect the entire distribution of forces. To it, Belarus simply does not exist! It believes that developments there do not affect the region.

Certainly, everybody studied geography in school and can show Belarus on the map. But the Germans seem to perceive Belarus as part of Russia. I do not blame them – I am talking about values.

Andrey Dynko

Post-election protests this past March landed me in jail for some time. This jail had been built with funding from the TACIS program. This is a very comfortable jail and I offer cordial gratitude to the TACIS program and the European Union for building it. I would even ask them to build more such jails in Belarus. This was probably the best investment of the TACIS program that could be ever imagined.

The EU policy appears to be contradictory. Europeans simply did not know Belarus for a long time, did not understand it as the country did not fit into the stereotypes. They attempted to maintain contacts with it through the same schemes applied to other countries. It turned out that completely different schemes should have been used.

I can speak about my sphere, the media. Since taking over as chief editor of *Nasha Niva*, I have heard assurances from the EU that independent media outlets will be supported in Belarus. And I have not seen any real support over these years. And the projects that they do carry out are largely aimed at supporting EU media rather than Belarusian outlets. The EU has the right to do it and I accept this. But on the other hand, in the Belarusian situation one should follow a principle used in medicine: if a doctor cannot cure a disease, he should do his utmost not to aggravate it.

What is most important for Belarus in the long-term future is to have its economic, cultural, political and simply interpersonal ties with the European Union expanded. I guess various sanctions that could damage these contacts would prove harmful. Belarus needs not isolation but the opposite. Isolation can be applied only to a small group of people who violate European rules in a cynical and impudent manner, people implicated in crimes.

But the expansion of economic contacts would help open up Belarus. If not today, then tomorrow. Broader political relations with Belarus' civil society would lead to this either. Broader cultural cooperation supports free speech in Belarus and changes the atmosphere in the country. The best thing that could happen is the removal of borders. I understand that it is

yet idealistic to dream of this but any steps to ease visa formalities open Europe for Belarusians. Latvia's decision to abolish visa fees is great! This step will pay its way.

Valery Fralou

Let me give an example. Once the British ambassador invited me to a meeting with a diplomat who came from the European Union. The latter was very happy to tell me that they had adopted a resolution of sorts. I understand that this official who visits this European Parliament often follows his principles. I understand western people: they seek to solve all problems through democratic methods. We want them to help us so that we use similar methods. But this is a pretty challenging task because they have their own laws and observe them. And these laws do not provide for the possibility of threatening someone, cleaning somebody's clock...

I guess they've got pretty much headache by thinking what should be done with us. I guess they are starting to realize that shaking a finger at 'bad boys' won't help. It all is good for nothing unless these 'bad boys' are sent to stand in a corner or get a whipping. I don't see a tough, consistent policy that would help. There's much talk about television, radio broadcasts... I think much will depend on specific people who will be guided by their own interests. Belarus is not high on their agenda. Well, if Belarusians themselves cannot develop a clear stance and demonstrate that they are ready and want to live in a different country... And they live haphazard! So, why should they come to those who don't know how they want to live?

I'm not speaking about such politicians like Alyaksandr Milinkevich. A small group of people do have a vision of this. But there is no common line, that's why western politicians don't know whom to help here, what to do and whether their efforts will not prove futile.

Apart from this, there is strong influence from Russia. The European Union may have a wish to influence Belarus somehow, but Russia does this on the other side. And political games begin then. This looks like a tug of

war competition – winners get a boost to their ego, a feeling that 'we are a powerful country'. And globally, they are not very much interested in Belarus. Well, there is such a country, there are some people there, most of whom do not know where to go. What for should one go there? Unlike Iran, we have already given up the possession of nuclear weapons and are not pursuing any controversial programs, we have no mineral resources. Well, the gas pipeline may be of some interest. And they want us to be predictable. And even if there's some unpredictability, we'll get a blow to our head: many countries have already joined NATO. And Russia also will be on the alert. It is strong enough!

We have found ourselves on the rift between Russia and the West – and both influence us. I would not like Belarus to choose between: 'We go to Russia and couldn't care less about the West' and 'We join the West and don't care about Russia'. We should have a broader outlook. And they say: 'let's join Europe, period'. But they are not waiting for us there. Who needs us?

Life is a pretty rough thing. Our country and each of its citizens need to learn how to live without being held by the hand, guided and provided instructions on everything.

This is just like in a zoo: the cages are freshly painted, the roads are sanded, meat is brought to your cage and you are safe from other animals locked in their cages. Everything is OK! This is how we're used to live. You walk in your cage, then lie down for a while. But humans, just like any other beings, should live in natural environment! And we're still staying in the zoo...

Svyatlana Kalinkina

Only the United States has always pursued an unambiguous policy regarding Belarus unlike Europe.

Europe is actually the main partner of Belarus and Lukashenka, as he rules the country. Earlier we said that Belarus mainly traded with Russia, but now it turns out that we mainly trade with Europe. The European Union is

our largest trading partner. This is a very complicated problem. The position of Europe, Western nations, is quite understandable, as there are too many problems in the modern world. In this sense, Belarus, in which there are no interethnic conflicts and bloodshed, and the Orthodox Christians are in peace with the Catholics, is not a hot spot to take any drastic measures.

But there is another danger here. In my opinion, Europe is beginning to realize that Belarus is turning into a nest of revanchism for all Europe, supporting and encouraging retrogressive forces in both former Yugoslavia and Ukraine and Russia and the Baltic states. That is why it is very dangerous to have a center that helps such forces.

Until now, the European Union's policy has been inconsistent. Moreover, it cannot be viewed as a common policy of the European Union. For instance, France and Britain held one stance and Germany, Italy and Austria preferred quite a different stance. This is what we could see until recently.

But something has changed now. The European policy is now more definite, more clear-cut and more specific. But I think that Europe still hopes that the Belarus issues may be somehow settled with the help of Russia. That is why Europe still choose to confine itself to half-measures in relations with Belarus. It is fine if it is really possible to change the situation in Belarus with the assistance of Russia and Russia helps our country return to a democratic path of development. But Belarus may bring much of its own into Russia, not the reverse.

Syarhey Kalyakin

The EU wants to see Belarus a member of the common European family, but the country does not meet standards accepted in Europe. The EU wants to see transformation in Belarus. It used various legal political tools to influence the situation. Human rights abuses are not an internal matter. When the OSCE or the Council of Europe condemns human rights violations in Belarus it uses absolutely legal tools recognized elsewhere in the world.

To my regret, the EU lacks effective tools to change the situation in Belarus. It keeps its attention focused on Belarus, but does not have effective tools of influence.

The EU has a big bureaucracy. Any decision requires approval of all 25 countries. Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic and other countries give priority to matters concerning Belarus, while the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain have other priorities. Therefore, these countries do not consider it necessary to speed up decision-making on issues concerning Belarus. It is difficult for many people in Europe, even top politicians, to find Belarus on the map. We think our country is in the center of attention with every nation seeking to conquer and enslave it. The problem is that Belarus is not a top priority in European politics. The issues of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, Iraq and Iran take precedence at present. If Belarus were a top priority, problems would be sorted out much faster. But for the EU and most of its members Belarus is not a top priority, while some countries view it only as an instrument for cooperation with Russia.

I and my associates in the pro-democratic coalition have been working to raise Belarus' profile. We have succeeded in a way and we are very grateful to our neighbors for keeping the EU concerned about our country.

Kasya Kamotskaya

EU institutions are weak and undecided. They are holding discussions and debates on Belarus, but their statements do not differ one from another. The Belarusian situation requires a different approach from the EU – a tough, constructive and uncompromising stance. They do not seem to consider the country part of Europe thinking it is somewhere far away.

Syarhey Kastsyanyan

The EU is not homogenous. The EU is guided by directions from Washington. It does not have independent policies, but it has independent poli-

ticians advocating cooperation with Belarus. For instance, a delegation of German businesspeople visited Belarus earlier this week. New agreements have been signed with Slovakia and Slovenia. It is important that economic cooperation continues.

Vyachaslau Kebich

From the political point of view, the EU (which includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) seeks to bring Belarus under its fold.

The Baltic countries still can pursue policies independent of Brussels, while Poland cannot. The Belarusians and Poles have never been on friendly terms. Poland still regards Belarus as its former territory.

Anatol Lyabedzka

The EU does not have a strategy, if one does not consider the lack of strategy to be a sort of strategy. The recent presidential election inspired hopes that the EU will change its approach. Vilnius Conference 2006 was also encouraging. Earlier, Belarusian politicians at similar forums used to ask their European counterparts to say a few words about Belarus, whereas now nearly all speakers were talking about our country on their own initiative. This is a sign of political attention to Belarus. The 30 thousand people who joined our Maidan, a square that we call now Kalinouski Square, to protest Lukashenka's reelection also prompted Brussels to take a fresh look at Belarus and its future. The young people braved pressure and intimidation and their courage proves that there are advocates of European values, people who consider freedom a great value in Belarus. A change of attitude is also a result of long-term efforts of politicians.

However, the EU's attention should be converted into a strategy and later into an action plan. When this has been done, we would be able to say that Europe has a systematic policy with regard to Belarus.

We should take a pragmatic approach to international cooperation and should not be afraid to offend someone in Europe. We have our interests. If we want the EU help us overcome the regime in Belarus we should clearly express our positions. For instance, we should say 'No' to ineffective international assistance.

Projects have been discussed for years to break through the information blockade of Belarus. However, it is foreigners who make decisions without consulting experts in Belarus. How can one decide on a media project for Belarus without discussing it with media professionals in Belarus? European media projects for Belarus are not efficient, and this must be changed.

Various projects have been discussed for a long time to break through the information blockade of Belarus. However, it is foreigners who make decisions without consulting experts in Belarus. How can one decide on a media project for Belarus without discussing it with media professionals from Belarus? This means that European media projects for Belarus are ineffective, and this must be changed. It is necessary to state clearly our position on the issue. But it turns out that one part of our civil society seeks more favor from the international community than the other. This is a wrong position. There must be a consolidated position in relations with the international community.

The EU should not channel its support to a party, an NGO or a leader; it should target Belarusian people. This would be a strong argument in response to state-controlled media allegations that foreign assistance is aimed to do people harm. During the presidential election I had meetings in 17 locations each attended by 100 to 500 people. I asked the same question everywhere: 'You have three television channels that broadcast the same information. If, for instance, the EU provides funds for a satellite channel and you will be able to receive a different view on the same events and a different analysis. Who would reject such assistance raise your hands!' Two, three or four people would raise hands.

That means that the public in general is positive about assistance from which it can benefit. The efficiency is important!

Vasil Lyavonau

There have been many good statements, but there has been too much hypocrisy in the policies of a number of European states over the entire history of Belarus. This is a reality and we should not hope that Europe will do something instead of us and will give us something. Russia will also soon cease to give cheap natural gas.

Aleh Manayeu

If we compare the policy of the European Union with that of the United States, then, in my opinion, the USA's policy is far and away more adequate. But in recent years, the policy of the European Unions has become much more adequate than before, although it is still far from the level that many EuroBelarusians, and me personally, would like to see. Many institutions of the European Union still display caution and even indetermination with regard to both the present political regime in Belarus and civil society. I mean an whole system of specific activities. Let us take, for instance, the formal political level, i.e. the stance of the EU Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. In recent years, they have adopted a great deal of good and just resolutions and statements that condemn human rights violations and crackdowns on democracy in Belarus. But at another, pragmatic level, i.e. at the level of specific programs and support – I mean not only financial support but also political, technical, and information support – this support leaves much to be desired. Each resolution and each political statement should be followed by practical moves, specific projects and actions.

A striking illustration in this regard is their stance on Russia. Until now, in the opinion of the pro-democratic forces, one of the most important components of the European Union's strategy regarding Belarus should be placing the Belarus issue on the agenda of the EU's dialogue with Russia. This envisages quite specific proposals put forward to Russia with respect

to its relations with the Belarusian leadership, not some vague talks and hints. EU officials generally agree with this but when it is about making practical moves, they are not made. However, the situation seems to have started changing for the better in the last year. If so, to what degree? Let us see the consequences of the inclusion of the Belarus issue, although not as a major item, in the agenda of the G8 summit in St. Petersburg.

In 2005, the European Union launched several information projects for Belarus. These included 'Belarusian Chronicles' on Deutsche Welle, a special weekly show on the Israeli-American television channel RTVi, and extensive coverage of Belarus news by EuroNews. In a survey that we conducted in late April 2006, we asked the interviewed which televisions they watched. The Russian version of EuroNews was watched by 20 to 25 percent, and the special show of RTVi by 10 to 15 percent. Of course, someone may say that those who watch these programs will not necessarily become advocates of democracy. But we also asked the question, 'If you watched EuroNews, did you see the piece about the common candidate of pro-democratic forces, Milinkevich?' Thirty-nine percent answered that they had seen several times and 31 percent said that they had seen it at least once. This means that 70 percent of those watching EuroNews saw the Milinkevich report. Moreover, answers to another question showed that many of those who had seen it had begun to think of him better. This means that these projects are starting to work. Radio stations broadcasting to Belarus are listened to about 15 percent of all voters, or about a million people. Listeners to these programs discuss them with their friends, associates and members and gradually adopt European values and views. Members of the Belarusian opposition and skeptics in Europe question the influence of such information sources, but the Belarusians authorities respond quite promptly and resolutely, taking harsh measures to block them. So, the process is on. And the European Union is taking an increasingly active part in it. This participation raises hopes as well.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

The EU has elaborated a consolidated policy toward the dictatorial regime in Belarus for the first time in many years. It is important that the main European institutions have consistently not recognized referenda and elections conducted by the Belarusian authorities in violation of generally accepted democratic standards. But I must admit that Europe has not yet worked out a systematic approach to 'the Belarusian issue'. Before the presidential election, some national governments flirted with the Belarusian regime hoping that it will change its behavior. Time and events have proved that this regime cannot be reformed. Neither sticks nor carrots can help. On our part, we have always maintained that Europe should readopt the so-called 'two-fold approach' to Belarus with emphasis on cooperation with pro-democracy forces.

Anatol Mikhailau

To make policies more effective it is necessary to clearly define their substance. For the time being the policies are too abstract.

Tatsyana Protska

The EU does not seem to have a strategy with regard to Belarus. It is a very complicated situation in the world today with some countries reaping oil profits and other paying a high price for oil.

The EU has a hard time now that prices of oil and gas are high. Its policies with regard to Belarus will change as soon as the situation stabilizes. At present, the EU can turn a blind eye to human rights violations and a lack of democracy in Belarus. It does turn a blind eye because Belarus is a transit country.

There was a similar crisis in the 1970s. The West came out of the crisis by introducing new technologies, whereas the Soviet Union wasted the

money it earned and collapsed. Russia may end up in the same situation but its government is working to prevent it. Belarus will face a deep political crisis if it fails to use its oil revenues for modernization. So far, it has not been investing profits in the economy.

Real inflation is very high in our country, for instance real estate prices have risen dramatically. A square meter of housing floor space costs over \$1,000 in Minsk. Such a price seemed impossible before, but now it seems natural. This is because people have a lot of money and the government used revenues to raise wages, not for modernization.

I think many problems lie ahead. The EU's attitude to Belarus will change in a few years' time. Belarus is at a crossroads and the EU policies are adequate. It sympathizes with the peaceful, tolerant and hospital Belarusians. On the other hand, if the Belarusian government represents a threat, ignores laws, democracy and human rights, the EU can allow Russia to incorporate Belarus.

The EU takes a cautious approach, but it is waiting for Belarus to hold out its hand. It is like on Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, God offers his hand, but Adam's hand is so weak. Belarus' situation is the same as on this fresco painting.

Andrey Sannikau

Now more attention is devoted to Belarus, more concerns are voiced. But, however, this has not resulted in any specific steps. Their talk about the expansion of the travel ban list... If that's all that the EU is capable of, this points not only to its weakness but also to the reluctance to have a serious attitude toward our situation, as far as I see. Because the EU has other tools available, it could use them. Take trade and economic relations: certain EU member states have raised trade with Belarus threefold, fourfold, fivefold. There are tools! I'm not speaking about methods of using them – embargoes, sanctions, license terminations for certain government-controlled companies. There are legal tools: one thing is to impose a travel ban on officials, and

opening criminal proceedings in connection with Belarus' disappearances is quite different. There are such precedents and this can be done. Those plans for a media project have not been materialized... It's only a waste of time and money, frankly speaking. I guess the project may involve talented people from our country but it yields no results: no one knows anything, hears anything or sees anything. Some of my acquaintances saw a program aired by RTVi - it was horrible: there was no one from Belarus and they all cited one story published by the 'Guardian' as if there are no other articles.

We have no such atmosphere that existed in Poland in the Soviet era. Almost all people tuned in to SW radio stations at that time. Today is the era of FM stations and SW stations cannot rival them. That's why they need to support what is here.

Stanislau Shushkevich

The European Union has found itself in a trap. It was once designed as a union of countries that share political principles: some had these traditions deeply rooted and some at least knew where they should be headed. Their common laws, which have been reflected in an EU constitution which so far has not been adopted, suited the interests of these countries. However, certain problems emerged after 10 new members representing Central Europe joined. The EU members simply did not have time to review their laws. They still draw up the bloc's budget on old principles. And they find it hard to apply these principles to the new members, as everything should be in line with national laws first. And the situation has become even more confusing after such countries like Belarus were admitted to the OSCE. These organizations have in fact stopped to play any unification role. I would call it a transitional period in the European Union. The bloc had failed to fine-tune its laws prior to the enlargement. We in fact did experience that – but on a smaller scale: we knew what the Soviet Union and Article 6 of the constitution were. We abolished the article and started rectifying our constitution, but it was impossible to do this, and we finally

adopted a democratic constitution, which, however, had to be fine-tuned. And the EU currently also has no laws, no legal basis to provide real assistance to such country like Belarus. It does not! They can help only through governments, as it was meant to be a union of conscientious democratic governments elected in a democratic manner. They can change, there can be such controversy like the one in Austria when nationalist forces won elections, or something that may happen in Italy. And I believe it will take pretty much time to finalize these laws.

Moral support from European countries is great. But if we speak about some real support, this can only be done through individual member states like, for instance, Slovakia did. As for the EU in general, I'm really not sure... I have never visited Brussels, and don't know what to speak about with the EU administration. I know what laws they are guided by and think that nothing efficient can be done on the basis of these laws.

We can criticize EU bureaucracy (and I do sometimes), but this is a legal bureaucracy that works according to laws. And the European bureaucrat is not allowed to bypass these laws. And they in fact have no such laws that would make it possible to solve such problems like the Belarusian one. And this is what matters most for them. Mind you, 10 new countries joined the bloc and they now have to settle related problems. The overall budget deficit that the new member states have amounts to something like €12 billion. And they don't have these billions and have nowhere to take them from. And they must find them in accordance with their laws, because this is what must work tomorrow. And Belarus will wait...

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

It is a minimalist policy, a list of intentions. The new European Neighborhood policy heralds 'cohabitation' in the context of one more emerging partition line. On the one hand, the European Union has declared an intention to become closer to Belarus after its expansion. On the other hand, it is introducing strict visa formalities, also for entry to regions that Belarus

never in its history had borders with – Latvia, Lithuania and even Poland, travel to which always was more or less easy. Moreover, the procedure of obtaining a visa is becoming increasingly more complicated and humiliating. It is clear that it has nothing to do with general European values that the EU is ideologically committed to. The argument that there is a need to increase fight against illegal migration does not work. You will not see a group of Belarusian migrants conspicuous for crimes or social disturbances in a single European country. But you will surely see Ukrainian, Moldovan, Russian, Albanian, Chinese or Vietnamese communities with an unfriendly attitude to the law almost in every big European city. Belarusians are very cautious and particular about moving to another country. By the way, it is also a unique feature of the national character.

According to Brussels, Europe has moved closer to us after May 2004, but actually it has moved away. This is a bright example of Europe's policy.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

In general, the EU policies are adequate.

Andrey Vardamatski

The EU is very slow. It takes long to make a decision. For instance, the EU's media projects for Belarus are absolutely ineffective, not only in terms of readership or listeners, but also as far as the general approach is concerned. Instead of news from Belarus, people are offered a description of the benefits of the EU. The offered subjects are inconsistent with the demand for independent information in the country. Talk on media projects for Belarus is bigger than the coverage of the new stations.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

The EU had no policy with regard to Belarus until recently. It just reacted to developments in the country in an unsystematic and symbolical way. Belarus is a very small geopolitical factor for the EU compared to the Middle East, the Balkans, Maghreb for France, Ukraine with its population of 50 million, or Russia.

The EU, which has difficulty making common decisions, needed to have a group of nations concerned about Belarus. After the enlargement it started making attempts to systemize its approach to the country. The so-called two-fold approach can be effective on condition it is applied consistently.

Its first element is punitive isolation of the regime and its leaders. The EU's strong-worded resolutions, which were ignored by the Lukashenka regime, were followed by really effective steps such as the travel ban on targeted officials suspected of involvement in high-profile disappearances, election fraud and persecution of opposition supporters. The EU also ordered the freezing of assets of the blacklisted officials (a less effective move because they are unlikely to keep their assets in the EU). The authorities' reaction proves that the blacklist should be expanded and publicized in Belarus.

The EU does not support economic sanctions. So don't I.

The second element is to make Europe as open as possible to representatives of civic society and pro-democracy groups. The policy does not boil down to declarations. It implies specific steps backed by financial resources. There is a lot to be done in this direction. It is also necessary to rectify the EU's previous mistakes. It took us quite long to persuade the European Commission that the TACIS (Technical Assistance for the CIS) program was absolutely ineffective in terms of support for civic society, because the program rules require the Belarusian authorities' approval for all expenses. Could you imagine Lukashenka government approving

a project for support of one of the human rights organizations, which it closes one after another?

The opposition can influence policies of the European neighbors and other countries. When opposition forces united, put forward a common credible leader and broke through the electoral ghetto, the level of support, both verbal and practical, considerably increased. As long as the opposition is strong, de-facto European, here in Belarus, the EU will have no option but to support and recognize it. If the United Pro-Democratic Forces remain a key political player, Russia will see that we are able to build and defend our independent Belarusian state.

Usevalad Yancheuski

Honestly, I do not see any policy. The European Union does not understand Belarus and does not seem to be willing to do so.

Europe looks down on us. It has a consumer's attitude to us. It often slips up because arrogance does not suit the mighty as well. We are not big and it is hard to see us from the Brussels and Washington peaks. That is why they do not understand us. That is why they look silly when they think that Belarusian officials will be very much disappointed over their travel restrictions.

Europe misses great opportunities for cooperation with Belarus. Our stability is our plus, and it is a big plus for Europeans. If they tried to make a use of it they could have a considerable economic gain.

Belarus tackles a number of problems for Europe. Above all, it blocks the traffic of illegal migrants and drugs. Europe occasionally gives us lazy kicks for that. Such attitude does not encourage us to protect Europe more efficiently from stuff travelling from Asia. It is not a sound policy.

And finally Europe is simply wasting time. Europeans believe for some reason that we will follow the lead of Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic. But we are not Poland, nor are we Hungary and the Czech Republic. For some

reason, they naively think that Lukashenka remains in power by accident. Over the 12 years, they have failed to understand that he is in for the long haul.

I would like to say once again that Europeans do not carry out any policy toward us. I have the impression that Europe's policy regarding Belarus is nothing but a series of some statements that have been stored in one folder on a computer since 1996 and that have only dates and occasions changed in them.

Americans and Europeans often call to my mind Soviet bureaucrats, particularly when they say something. Their language is similar to that of the Soviet TASS news agency. Their words are absolutely standard and predictable. It is well possible to forecast what the US Department of State or some European commissioner will say in five years. In this regard, they look a bit funny.

An interesting thing is that Belarus asks almost nothing of Europe. Europeans are lamenting over our restrictions on foreign assistance. They should not. Our president helps European taxpayers save their money that will anyway be stolen and that is now being stolen. All European assistance programs are absolutely inefficient. As a rule, money that is channeled into post-Soviet states in various grants is blatantly stolen.

European politicians cannot put up with the fact that Belarus' policies are shaped in strict accordance with the desires of a majority, which happens rarely. It happened that Lukashenka appeared in Belarus. It happened that Lukashenka managed to realize the political expectations of many people thanks to his unique personality. Neither Russia, nor Ukraine managed to do so – the countries had been ruled by a minority government, a group of self-appointed Communist leaders, before 1991, and were ruled by a minority government after 1991.

An interesting thing happened in Belarus. Its course has been shaped around the needs of a majority. A majority had nostalgia for the Soviet era and this was reflected in political programs. A majority wanted to live in a socially oriented state as many like to say now (or in a paternalistic state as political observers like to say, or to have state support to put it plain) and

this was reflected in political programs as well. A majority did not want to see any shocking social disparities and no privatization reform was carried out here. And government officials are rather modest in Belarus because the authorities force them to be such.

It just happened that most Belarusians do not want to become part of a general European context for the moment being. That is a fact. It is not a 'malicious or malevolent fact'. What could be more absurd than to come up with a book entitled *Accidental President*?⁴⁰ Fyaduta⁴¹ was correct when he wrote in his book that Lukashenka was far from being accidental.

He is not accidental for two reasons. Firstly, such a person is doomed to become a great leader, an important historic personality because of his personal features, such as charisma, an ingenious political intuition and a unique ability to feel the breath and light steps of history. Perhaps, Lukashenka is the only politician in the post-Soviet region who possesses this mysterious gift.

Secondly, people could not vest him with such wide powers by accident. The mentality and values of an overwhelming majority of our people differ from those in a European democratic state. Our people sought neither political freedoms, nor parliament. It is wrong to say that they were stripped of the freedoms. There was no crackdown on the freedoms either. Nobody just needed them. And it was clearly seen between 1991 and 1994.

I would like to stress that people have obtained all freedoms that they wanted. People were seeking individual freedoms at the dawn of the Soviet Union. They wanted to have freedom of movement. Everybody in the Soviet Union wanted to travel freely around the world. If people are deprived of this freedom, they will take to the streets in any country. An overwhelming majority wished to be free from excessive state patronage, dictatorship, party meetings, political propaganda, brainwash and control over private life (over your relations with the spouse, for instance).

⁴⁰ *Accidental President* is a book about Alyaksandr Lukashenka by Belarusian journalists Pavel Sharamet and Svyatlana Kalinkina.

⁴¹ Alyaksandr Fyaduta is a Belarusian journalist known for Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Political Biography.

Actually, it was a minority in the Soviet Union that demanded political freedoms, whereas a majority demanded these fundamental, individual freedoms.

Belarus has, and I think will have, all freedoms that the society then wanted. People rejected the concept of political freedoms as defined by the West conscientiously and voluntarily. There was an absolutely definite choice in favor of, say, monocratic rule. I always object when our political regime is described as dictatorship. It is wrong, incorrect, absurd and even blasphemous. One should not shake hands with a person who says so. Real dictatorships killed hundreds, thousands, millions of people. There were prisons, tortures and executions there.

How could you compare them with Belarus where few dozen people are put in jail for 15 days for disturbing the public peace. When dictators rule, people are not put in jail for 15 days but for 15 years, or launched into eternity altogether. Opposition newspapers are not suspended under dictatorship, they simply do not exist. Opposition leaders also do not hold large-scale meetings. Why then do you talk about dictatorship? Why do you use this 'heavy and tragic word' so freely?

It is true that we have an authoritarian regime. The president himself acknowledges that. A majority have chosen this regime conscientiously. People did understand the key idea of the 1996 constitution. They did understand that they were giving power to Lukashenka.

I was a deputy to the Parliament between 2000 and 2004 and I have always acknowledged that our parliament does not have such extensive powers as the European Parliament. It is not surprising because a majority of our people have chosen a political system that is not based on the separation of powers but the rule of one person.

A majority of the Belarusian people want such system. And we understand that our choice is correct when looking at the present Ukraine.

Europe, EU should remember that France was going toward democracy for several centuries surviving more than one bloody revolution. Germans paid for their democracy with millions of their lives and the lives of other people.

We do not want to go toward democracy through turmoil and are not willing to pay for it with blood. Throughout the entire 20th century, our long-suffering Belarus was sacrificing everything for a bright Communist future. Communist bosses used to say, 'We need to be a little bit patient today and everybody will be happier tomorrow'. Advocates of liberal market economy also used to say, 'We need to be a little bit patient today. Unemployment, anarchy and rampant crime are the cost of the transition period'.

That is a key difference between Lukashenka and his opponents. The latter once again want to make people suffer for the sake of a murky future, while Lukashenka knows that people want to live a normal life here and now, not tomorrow or in a couple of decades. And that is what his policies are about. That is where his truth and strength are in.

Our people do not have any more energy to start building another bright future, a democratic one this time. It would be nice if smart people in Europe realized the fact, which is not very much intricate.