

Where is Belarus heading to?

The debate **Belarus – lost chance for change?** took place on 14th October 2008, in the Zielna Conference Centre. It was organised by the Warsaw Office of Heinrich Böll Foundation.

The meeting was attended by about 60 participants from various European countries; they discussed the political situation in Belarus after the last parliamentary election.

The introduction was delivered by the Director of the Warsaw Office of Heinrich Böll Foundation **Agnieszka Rochon**. She said that political situation in Belarus had for months been neglected by members of the European Union. The change took place only after the outbreak of the Caucasian conflict. Certain EU countries, afraid of Russia, have since tried to create closer links with Belarus. Significant changes occurred in Belarusian foreign policy as well, since the incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko recently released political prisoners, which had been a long-standing demand of the Western countries.

After Rochon's introduction, the debate's moderator **Wawrzyniec Konarski** – professor of political sciences at Warsaw School of Social Psychology and Humanities and University of Warsaw - took the floor. According to him, Belarusian political system is a constitutional hybrid. Describing it as a dictatorship is an exaggeration, since it does contain certain elements of civil society. Consequently, Konarski defined Belarusian political system as a “democraship”. At the same time, he emphasised that many EU politicians knew little about East European issues, which undermined the influence of Western countries upon Belarus.

The first of the panellists speaking was **Vitali Silitski**, head of Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. He commenced by declaring, that he would like to look at the Belarusian election from inside. He emphasised that the election was considered by the USA and the EU as a sign of progress, which was Lukashenko's main objective. The Belarusian president did not want to introduce significant systemic changes, and at the same time he was eager to convince Western politicians that Belarus underwent democratisation. According to Silitski, the election proved to be Lukashenko's significant success, since the EU countries recognised its legality. Simultaneously, Lukashenko managed to marginalise the role of the opposition in the country, since there were hardly any protests against the government's malpractices before the election. Critics of the governing power were isolated and deprived of access to the general public. Consequently, the election proved of more interest to foreign observers than to the Belarusians themselves, making Lukashenko's task easier. Officially he declared openness and cooperation with the EU, but in reality he changed very little – still, he achieved his objectives. The president did release political prisoners – among them one of his greatest enemies, Alexander Kazulin. What is more, he invited foreign observers to the election. Lukashenko sensed the West's anxiety about him, and tried to win EU's favours at little cost. As soon as he discovered that the changes might threaten him, the liberties were significantly curbed. The closer it was to the election, the more blackmail and threats were aimed at the opposition. In addition, the election results were partially rigged.

In Silitski's opinion, the European Union is weary of Lukashenko's rule, and at the same time quite powerless towards the Belarusian leader. In the present situation it seems important to outline a comprehensive strategy of the Western countries towards Belarus. The EU governments ought to make up their minds whether to confront Lukashenko, or try to take little steps towards changing the Belarusian political system. The EU recently suspended sanctions against Belarus, and Lukashenko promises democratic changes in return, nevertheless his declarations do not seem reliable.

Andrew Wilson, a Fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, was the next one to take the floor. He began by stating, that Lukashenko tries to conduct a foreign policy similar to Tito's strategy in former Yugoslavia. He wants to retain state control over the economy, and at the same time maintain relatively good economic and political contacts with the West. On the other hand, he aims at friendly relations with Putin, although some years ago his relationship with Russia was far from perfect. According to Wilson, Lukashenko's policy is effective, while the EU's stance seems unclear and inconsistent. Only in 2004 did the Union begin to think about a comprehensive policy towards Belarus, although no binding decisions were taken at the time. Meanwhile, in his internal policies Lukashenko possesses practically unlimited power. The opposition is weak and divided, and has been marginalised all the more since 2006. Many odd scandals occurred, involving oppositionists; there were cases of beatings and threats, bomb attacks in Minsk, after which several representatives of authorities were named. Newly appointed officials were usually young technocrats connected with Lukashenko. The president introduces a lot of personal changes in this manner; nevertheless the basis of his policy remains the same. He manages to keep the Belarusian economy in good condition, although he does not allow for a market economy to develop. Wilson reckons that the EU ought to be cautious in its negotiations with Lukashenko, because any significant changes in Belarus are unlikely. On the other hand, it is important to demand reforms from the Belarusian president, but the pressure ought to be applied at the system's margins, where changes are possible. The EU ought to assist the opposition media in Belarus and abroad, concentrating on the Internet. Undoubtedly, one obstacle in drawing Belarus towards the West is its economic and political dependence on Russia, and particularly on Gazprom. Another problem is the lack of a comprehensive EU policy. One more important issue is Lukashenko's decision on South Ossetia and Abkhazia – should he decide to recognise them, he will bury the chance of change in Belarus.

The last of the panellists was **Paweł Wołowski** from the Centre of Eastern Studies in Warsaw. He is of the opinion, that in the last months the EU's attitudes towards Belarus have changed significantly. There is no longer a discussion on whether to conduct a dialogue with Belarus, but how this dialogue ought to look like, and how to make it most fruitful for the Belarusian society and the EU's interests. After the election, the Union granted itself six months to establish, whether democratisation in Belarus does advance. After this time, the EU is to decide whether to restore sanctions, or lift them for good.

According to Wołowski, Lukashenko very skilfully senses dangers and chances in foreign policy. After the war in Georgia, he spotted a chance for Belarus to improve relations both with Russia, and the West. Lukashenko takes advantage of the fact that Putin is interested in Belarus's support on the issue of Ossetia and Abkhazia, and that EU became alarmed about the increased Russian influence, and seeks Lukashenko's favours as well. This puts the Belarusian president in a comfortable position, as both sides are trying to outdo each other as far as relations with Belarus are concerned. Consequently, Lukashenko's position has strengthened considerably in the last few weeks, in spite of him having no plans to change the political system. The next few days will bring a meeting of EU experts with Lukashenko, during which projects for possible changes in Belarus will be discussed, however slim the chances of success.

Wołowski sees three potential pitfalls in the present policy of the European Union. One is capitulation, i.e. accepting the principles of dialogue imposed by Lukashenko's regime. Present declarations of Belarusian authorities indicate that Belarus does not want to talk about political changes, but merely about slight reforms of economic policy. Nevertheless, under the Western pressure Lukashenko released political prisoners in the last months, and the opposition had better chances than before to participate in the public debate preceding

the election. That is why the Union ought to continue putting pressure on Belarusian authorities to tone down political repression.

The second pitfall is maximalism, i.e. unrealistic escalation of EU's expectations from the Belarusian authorities (e.g. demanding immediate introduction of full democracy, pluralism and freedom of press in Belarus). Wołowski reckons that EU will not impose democracy upon the country, unless the Belarusian society is ready to embrace it.

The third pitfall concerns geo-politics, and could occur if EU bases its policy towards Belarus on Russia's expectations. The Union must act in its own best interest, and has the right to negotiate with Belarus and conduct bilateral economic negotiations. This is not to suggest, that EU could afford to provoke Russia, nevertheless it should be autonomous in its policy of defending its own interests.

According to Wołowski, the best EU strategy towards Belarus would be adopting a policy of concrete small steps, or the attitude of courageous realism. The best solution would be to define 3-5 detailed priorities for change, with a timetable for their implementation. The plan should be accompanied by a system of consequences and rewards for different circumstances. EU should insist on Lukashenko to abandon political repression, withdraw the austere act on Internet censorship, curb the anti-Western propaganda in the media, and gradually liberalise the economy, i.e. equalise the rights of foreign and domestic businesses.

After their speeches, the panellists heard a series of questions, which allowed them to elaborate on their papers.

Silitski answered a question about possible concessions on the part of Lukashenko's regime. According to him, Belarusian authorities are unwilling to embrace change, but it is worth trying to gradually undermine the policy of fear and moral foundations of the system. Lukashenko's regime might also be undermined by the occurring privatisation processes. On the other hand, they might lead to bankruptcies of certain branches of the industry.

Silitski commented on the question of visas, prompted by some members of the audience. He reckons that abolishing visas is predominantly a matter of dignity, since Belarusian citizens find them humiliating. Silitski considers this issue more important than the fact that visas remain very costly. Under those circumstances it is hardly surprising, that Belarus maintains such close relations with Russia, which attempts to impose its legal system upon its neighbour. Continuing, Silitski answered a question about the role of Belarusian language. He reckons that the language was practically eradicated from the culture; the media are predominantly Russian; and Belarusian is spoken mainly by a few enthusiasts and oppositionists, who use it as a way of expressing their protest against the authorities.

Wilson answered a question on whether Lukashenko would have won the election, had it been fully democratic. The answer was positive, since many Belarusians see no alternative. The authorities provoked internal conflicts within the opposition, which at the moment is not strong enough to create a consistent political force. Wilson commented on the issue of Belarus's relations with Russia. He reckons that Russia has strong links with the Belarusian military and telecommunications sectors, but at the moment is unsure about steps to take. Wilson shared Silitski's view, that EU should gradually abolish visas for Belarusians, beginning with certain groups, e.g. students.

Wołowski agreed with Wilson that there will be no significant concessions on Lukashenko's part. EU should rather opt for introduction of small but concrete legal reforms. Wołowski is of the opinion, that the Union has no "stick" to threaten Lukashenko, and is completely powerless in its policy towards Belarus. Wołowski answered the question about

Lukashenko's main objective, saying, that he is mainly concerned about staying in power. He considers Russia to be his power's chief guarantor, but at the same time the main threat to the Belarusian leader. Russia would like to control the sectors central to Belarusian economy and, should it succeed, Lukashenko would certainly be in danger of losing power. Wołowski commented on the issue of economic transformation in Belarus. He reckons that although privatisation is underway, the system's fundamentals will not be afflicted in the nearest future. Liberal capitalism might become popular in Belarus, but mainly among the young, who would be its beneficiaries. People living in the country appreciate stability and social security, which makes them opposed to liberalisation. Wołowski commented on the issue of possible consequences of Belarus's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He is of the opinion that the West puts pressure on Lukashenko not to recognise those republics, nevertheless Russia has powerful economic arguments in negotiations with Belarus, so it would not be surprising, if Lukashenko succumbed to Putin's insistence. Wołowski does not consider Lukashenko's decision on the subject critical - there are more important issues in relations between EU and Belarus.

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