

EFFICIENCY FIRST TOWARDS A COHERENT EU STRATEGY FOR BELARUS

As stated clearly in the European Neighbourhood Policy country strategy paper for Belarus adopted by the European Commission on 28 May 2004, the long term objectives of the EU are that Belarus be a “democratic, stable, reliable, and increasingly prosperous partner” with a common agenda driven by shared values. Against the backdrop of the EU enlargement and the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy, assisting Belarus into a stable democracy becomes increasingly important.

In order to reach this objective the EU needs to carefully evaluate the existing assistance instruments and mechanisms in place to come to a more effective strategy to support democratic changes in Belarus. Especially taking into account the political momentum in the country after the 2004 campaign and particularly the impact that the elections in Ukraine are already making within the Belarusian society, there is an obvious need to elaborate an ambitious, rapid, well-coordinated and effective strategy regarding:

- measures that will have an immediate and direct impact on the forthcoming presidential elections in 2006 (or, possibly, already in 2005) and
- initiatives that focus on a mid- and long-term impact, for instance in the area of education, socially oriented and municipal development, small- and medium-size business, environment and Chernobyl related projects.

The current EU mechanisms primarily provide financial assistance through TACIS and the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Funding through the EIDHR would be available by 2006 at the earliest and that is very late given the date of the presidential elections. TACIS has its limits when it comes to the special case of Belarus, because it is designed for countries that are willing to cooperate within the legal framework and the rules of the EU. The derogation of existing TACIS rules is needed, allowing for funding of projects for democratization and civil society without government’s consent. Regulations need to be flexible enough to deal with entities that are unregistered, have lost registration, have non-Belarusian registration, or run projects outside Belarus. These are the main obstacles that hamper the real engagement of the EU.

Bearing in mind the short-time frame within which the EU has to set up a more efficient strategy towards the country – in particular with the upcoming elections – the EU should focus on the following top three priorities:

1) Create an ad-hoc, flexible financial mechanism

TACIS is clearly not meeting the full needs of Belarusian civil society and the expectations of non-governmental organisations and those member-states, which would like to provide flexible and non-bureaucratic assistance. The rules and regulations limit the scope, flexibility, and speed with which funds can be utilised.

TACIS must be flanked by an **External Fund for Belarus** that is managed and disbursed by the Commission with assistance of a small number of interested member states. Such a fund could be located at one of the EU member states bordering the country, such as Poland or Lithuania. Such a fund needs to operate outside the strict guidelines of the Commission. The purpose and mission of the Fund would be to offer fast and flexible support to Belarusian democratic forces and NGOs that fall outside the parameters of current EU regulations and often have to operate on an illegal basis inside the country.

2) Improve EU public diplomacy measures in Belarus and establish a European House to serve as a hub for all the information related to the EU and try to compensate via such an instrument the fact that the EU has still no official representation in Minsk. Critical to the success of transitioning Belarus into a stable democracy is an informed citizenry with access to independent, objective news. This can be achieved through active pro-EU campaigns run by youth and students movements. Equally important is making available timely and accurate information on the current situation in Belarus to the external world. Such a “European House” would also serve as a platform for meetings between representatives from civil society, the opposition and media.

3) Increase the visibility and values of Europe by establishing an **EU Special Representative for Belarus**. The EU’s commitment needs to be personalized by a credible political figure that will give its strategy a voice and a face. To break the deadlock of isolation and self-isolation that has kept the country away from any kind of closer cooperation with the EU there is a need for an ongoing advocacy effort by a prominent political figure that makes the case for Belarus in political fora and the media.

The time is now for the EU to take an enriched strategic and political approach towards Belarus, which is based on flexibility, transparency and efficiency. An essential element would be to build a forceful and articulated alliance with EU member states and NGOs that have a special interest in the country. In addition to the top three priorities that will be the basis of a new strategy composed of already existing and new mechanisms, the annex below lists concrete proposals for action in the different areas that need to be supported.

Background:

These recommendations are the outcome of the workshop “Belarus – Actors – Needs – Challenges” that was set up on February 1- 2, 2005, in Vilnius by the Bertelsmann Foundation in cooperation with the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the participation of officials from the European Commission in the role of observers.

Annex

EFFICIENCY FIRST

TOWARDS A COHERENT EU-STRATEGY FOR BELARUS

Proposals discussed in the workshop on 1-2 February 2005

Information & Media

- Support opposition newspapers and magazines
- Increase the visibility of the EU by creating a public awareness campaign, including the campaign for the promotion of European values
- Publish Belarusian authors
- Provide alternative and independent source of media to the average Belarusian
- Assist Belarusians to travel outside the country to expose them to other ideas and ways of life

Education

- Increase funds for study and cultural exchange for Belarusian students to go abroad, including facilitation of the functioning of Yakub Kolas lyceum and EHU in exile
- Support NGOs especially related to Chernobyl problems
- Create democracy education programmes using democratic and market system achievements in Poland and Lithuania as examples

Political

Election-strategy for 2006:

- Bring European politicians to Belarus before the presidential elections
- Help to identify and support a single opposition candidate
- Have an organised strategy post-election
- Continue election monitoring and support to democratic forces:
 - Support for the establishment of analytical centres, including the analytical group as part of pro-democratic forces joint election campaign as well as conducting of regular public opinion polls, especially vis-à-vis pro democratic candidates; election day exit polls/early voting tracking polls.
 - Support to political parties and movements in election campaigns:
 - Rent of premises for staff and meetings;
 - Compensation for traveling in the country and abroad;
 - Technical equipment;
 - Campaign related material;
 - Political platform abroad.

- Establish one member state as a central information hub on Belarus – perhaps Lithuania, including establishment of a think tank;
- Maintain international pressure on the regime
- Outreach to the Russian government to help Belarus
- Coordinate all Western donors and governments to have a joint message on Belarus
- Maintain flexibility / responsiveness to fluid political / social situation
- Establish solidarity fund to help victims, family members and persons hit by the regime
- Whenever possible, have prominent politicians and other notable figures mention Belarus in public statements
- Lift travel restriction and reduce visa costs for the average Belarusian

Civil Society

- Support and strengthen existing civil society organizations and independent media and media organizations
- Establish professional partnerships and knowledge transfer between the regional and local authorities of Belarus and EU countries, including engagement on social issues by conducting projects on municipal economy problems (especially directed at 2007 local elections)
- Address and focus international attention on environmental/health issues being minimized or ignored by the government of Belarus
- Accountability and transparency – need for a review of current legislation concerning the operation of humanitarian organizations working in Belarus
- Increased and substantial involvement in Chernobyl related projects
- Support for youth and students movements / “positive” and “negative” mobilization campaign, including street actions; providing campaign material, especially on pro-EU agitation (as part of “positive” campaign).
- Involve and use the networks of the churches