Analysis

Time for New Thinking on Belarus

Dov Lynch, 26 October 2005

In November 2004, the EU set forth a new framework for policy towards Belarus. One year on, this Note explores the need for thinking anew. The regional context around Belarus has changed dramatically, with an enlarged EU, a 'revolutionary' Ukraine, a more defensive Russia and more active US. EU policy may be strengthened to reflect and work with these changes.[1] This Note explores the options for EU policy and develops proposals at two levels:

- *Making the Region around Belarus Work:*
  This implies the EU pushing for progress with Ukraine and Moldova in order to provide genuine models for Belarusian society that show that the EU can exist for them also. The EU should ensure also that Belarus is raised on the agenda of the political dialogue with Russia.

- *Strengthening EU Policy:*
  This Note puts forward a number of ideas, including allocating more resources to EIDHR, opening a presence in Minsk, and working closely with the US on policy to Belarus. In addition, the EU will have to develop a strategy in advance of the 2006 presidential elections. The Union could also create a *Belarus Task Force* of willing member states to share information about national policies. Finally, the EU could designate 2006 a *Year of Remembrance of Chernobyl* and develop a multi-dimensional programme of activities targeted towards affected youth around this non-political theme.

[1] The EU Institute for Security Studies will soon publish a *Chaillot Paper*, which presents a comprehensive analysis of the problems raised by Belarus for EU policy.

A) CHANGES OF CONTEXT

Belarus does not pose a direct challenge or a hard threat to the EU. It would seem that the EU could afford to continue its current policy, betting on the hope that some day the people of Belarus will topple their leaders and return the country to the European fold.

And yet, the context is changing dramatically. The framework for current EU policy was set in 1997. At that time, the EU was preoccupied with enlargement and other pressing housekeeping chores. Relations with Russia were rosy, which seemed to posit a standoffish position from Brussels on Belarus. In addition, the EU did not have the policy tools necessary to engage with Belarus; the *European Neighbourhood Policy* and the *European Security Strategy* were still to come. In a word, Belarus was 'forgettable' in 1997. In 2005, it is not. The context has changed at four levels, which, taken together, press for new EU thinking.

A New Europe

The first level concerns strategic developments in Europe. The security architecture that Europe inherited from the Cold War is transforming and a new order is emerging. NATO is becoming a more globally orientated institution, with new roles in Afghanistan and Iraq and less direct involvement in European security. The OSCE has entered a crisis, as Participating States debate the question of its enduring utility, largely at Russia's insistence. At the same time, the EU is rising as a security provider. In 2003, the EU launched three missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2004, the EU assumed responsibility from NATO SFOR with Operation Althea. Moreover, EU member states have decided to create some thirteen battle groups of 1,500 troops to provide the EU with rapid capability. In addition, the first wave of Action Plans from the *European Neighbourhood Policy* has been agreed, notably with Ukraine and Moldova. Enlargement has transformed the EU, especially in its dealings with the Eastern neighbours. The active role of the Lithuanian and Polish presidents and Javier Solana during the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine was physical demonstration of a new EU.

With these wider changes, the EU will find it difficult to continue to rely on the OSCE as the framework for policy towards Belarus. At the same time, the EU is emerging as an important actor in Europe, willing to act on behalf of its interests and increasingly able to do so. The EU can now consider policy options towards Belarus that were not available in 1997. And it should.

A New US

A second strategic shift concerns the United States. In her hearing before the Senate in January 2005, the future Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, declared Belarus an 'outpost of tyranny.' In the wake of the popular revolutions that occurred in Georgia and Ukraine, this statement marks a new and more forceful US agenda towards Belarus. Especially after the change of regime in Kyiv, the US Administration views Ukraine and Georgia as models of inspiration for other states in the region. The former Soviet Union is in 'movement,' and the US is intent on seeking to direct the change that is occurring and to accelerate its pace. If US policy to Russia remains quite conciliatory, American strategy in the former Soviet Union, and especially the Western and Caucasian regions, is more 'revolutionary.'

The sharpening of US policy must be factored into EU thinking. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU and the United States pursued similar policy lines to Belarus. While transatlantic coordination has been strong on policy towards Ukraine and Belarus, the further sharpening of US policy may raise questions for the EU.

A New Russia

A third change is tied to developments in Russia. Russia in 2005 is very different to that of 1997. Russian domestic and foreign policy has changed, as have its relations with the EU. Staunchly defensive about Russia's sovereignty, Putin has developed an interest in a strategic partnership with the EU that is not all encompassing but limited. The Chechen conflict and the struggle against international terrorism have emerged as an area of difference with EU. At the same time, since 2003, it is becoming clear that there are not only divergent perceptions but also clashing interests in the shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU.

Under Putin, Russian-Belarusian relations have been troubled, even tense at times. The symbolic value that Boris Yeltsin has attributed to the union with Minsk has been abandoned by Moscow. Differences have arisen on the treatment of the Russian media in Belarus, Russian access to the privatisation of Belarusian assets, and the often-embarrassing human rights situation. The Russian government is also in the process of rethinking its reliance on Belarus as a transit zone for energy supplies to Europe. Still, Belarus has a vital part of Russian foreign policy. In military terms, it is seen as a defensive *glacis* by traditional military thinkers, and at least as an important forward position on the borders with NATO. With the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the anti-Russian line of Moldovan foreign policy, the Belarusian ally has gained vital importance for Moscow. In 2005, Russia and Belarus have deepened their security services and military cooperation. What is more, Moscow has positioned itself to back Lukashenka fully in the 2006 presidential elections. Russia is not going to let Belarus slip through its fingers.

More widely, EU relations with Russia in 2005 are different to 1997, which was a highpoint of optimism with regard to Russia. By 2005, member states were concerned with trends inside Russia and with its policies in the former Soviet Union. At the same time, the EU is intent on development greater engagement in the shared neighbourhood with Russia. Current difficulties in EU-Russia relations impact on EU thinking and policy towards Belarus.

A New Region

Finally, the changes occurring in the former Soviet Union alter the context around Belarus. After the first years of euphoria following independence, the post-Soviet order that emerged in the late 1990s in most of the former Soviet republics was characterised politically by 'managed democracies,' economically by deeply corrupt and opaque private/public spheres, and socially by widespread poverty and social disenchantment.

In essence, these circumstances were comfortable for the authoritarian ambitions of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine mark the start of a new period of upheaval in the post-Soviet space, with the rise of democratic, nationalist and European-orientated regimes that have come to power through significant demonstrations of popular support. The inertia of the post-Soviet order of the 1990s has been broken and the former Soviet Union is in movement once again. Change is not limited to Ukraine and Georgia. Since 2003, Moldova has also adopted a firmly Europe-orientated foreign policy.

In 1997, the Baltic states and Poland were not yet members of Euro-Atlantic structures, and Ukraine and Moldova found themselves in an ambiguous position between Europe and the former Soviet Union. By 2005, Belarus' immediate neighbours of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland have joined NATO and the EU, and Ukraine and Moldova are intent on leaving the post-Soviet space to join European structures.

This new regional context is highly uncomfortable for Belarus. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine have become an inspiration for its domestic opposition forces, at least providing them with the hope that 'things can change.' More fundamentally, Ukrainian and Georgian events highlight the fragility of the post-Soviet order that had emerged in the 1990s. For all their seeming stability, regimes *can* be toppled in weeks. The apparent stability of Lukashenka's regime pales in the light of these events. There is nothing inevitably enduring about the current regime. Quite the contrary.

B) POLICY OPTIONS

These changes in context have three implications. First, Belarus in 2005 cannot be left to it own devices. Enlargement precludes this option. Second, in light of events in Ukraine and Georgia, Lukashenka's regime is much more fragile that it would seem. With presidential elections in 2006, the EU should consider the possibility of a crisis arising in Belarus to which it will have no choice but to respond. Third, given current difficulties in relations with Russia, the EU must think ahead of terms of the 'Belarusian factor' in EU-Russian relations. Should a crisis arise in Belarus, how will Brussels interact with Moscow?

Belarus raises a question about the ambition of the EU as a foreign policy actor. The central message of the *European Security Strategy* is the EU's desire to build a rule-based international society of states: 'The quality of international society depends on the quality of the governments that are its foundation. The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states.' According to the Strategy, the EU main ambition should be the promotion of democracy beyond its borders. Through successive waves of

enlargement, the EU has an unbroken record of exporting democracy and importing democracies. However, enlargement is not yet conceivable for a country such as Belarus.

The question facing the EU becomes therefore: How can the EU best promote democracy in Belarus without offering enlargement? EU policy since 1997 has not worked. At the same time, nor was the limited engagement undertaken by Poland and Lithuania before EU membership all that effective.

What can the EU do? Hypothetically, the Union has two options.

Genuine Coercive Diplomacy

A first option is for the EU to develop a genuine coercive strategy employing tools of pressure to alter the calculation in Minsk of non-compliance with EU demands.

A reinforced policy of pressure on Belarus could include the following components:

1) Wider travel bans against the leadership in Minsk, as well as targeted asset freezing against Lukashenka.
2) Comprehensive support to Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the single opposition candidate to run in the 2006 presidential elections.
3) Providing extensive support to the opposition, and Belarusian civil society, before and during the campaign.
4) Raising the question of Russia's support to Lukashenka to the highest level of the Russia-EU dialogue.
5) Working with new member states, Ukraine and Moldova as well as the US to present a united front against the current regime in Minsk.
6) Developing an active information and media campaign through independent radio and television stations on Belarusian borders for the dissemination of objective information to the Belarusian public.

This policy would seize the opportunity presented by the 2006 presidential elections by forcing a crisis in Belarus that would undermine the current regime and perhaps even replace it with a democratically orientated government. Such a policy would also signal the rising strength of the EU as a foreign policy actor in Europe, ready and willing to defend democracy through active measures in the states on its borders. The potential pay-off could be significant, with the emergence of a new Belarus in Europe.

Thus far, the EU has not employed such a strategy of coercive diplomacy effectively for three reasons.

1) EU policy has not been coordinated amongst itself, with member states and other international organisations. This has weakened the EU ability to present a united face to Minsk.
2) The EU has never offered sufficiently positive incentives to outweigh the radical demand that it has made of the authorities in Minsk to leave power.
3) Finally, Russia's alliance with Belarus has relieved the pressure from Europe on Minsk and offered incentives to solidify the status quo.

As a result, the EU has been incapable until now of pursuing effective coercive diplomacy towards Belarus. In 2006, such a policy would face similar difficulties. It is not certain that EU member states would be united behind such a policy, especially because of its implication for relations with Russia. In addition, the opposition in Belarus is not more united or effective than it was several years ago. There is little reason to believe that Belarusian civil society, and the general public, is similar to Georgia's and Ukraine's before their revolutions. One must also recognise that support for Lukashenka and his model of 'non-transition' is real inside the country.

Deep Engagement

The second option is for the EU to seek to promote democracy by engaging deeply with Belarus. A policy of engagement would protect EU values not only by emitting statements of criticism against the regime but also by an active presence inside Belarus. Such a policy would pursue three strategic goals over the longer term:

1) *Build Profile* - The EU would seek to develop credibility in Belarus through an active presence on the ground.
2) *Reach New Interlocutors* - The EU would seek to develop contacts across Belarusian society, in the regions and mayoralties, in small and large businesses, in schools and universities and civil society.
3) *Delink the Question from Russia* - The EU would ensure that in addressing the Belarus question it is not dependent on passing through Moscow. Belarus should be raised in the Russia-EU dialogue, but the EU must be able to raise issues credibly and effectively with Minsk itself.

A policy of engagement is premised on the idea that the EU should seek to persuade Belarusian society and its political elite that the EU is a real alternative to authoritarian and an Eastern orientation. This policy would also recognise that the process of change in Belarus is likely to be long term. On the whole, this approach would seek to develop a wider profile inside Belarus. At the same time, the EU would continue to support civil society in Belarus and maintain a tough line on non-democratic developments.

Engagement is not without costs. Opening a delegation in Minsk would lead the Union to suffer the same kind of pressure the OSCE faced with its presence. Nor would this presence in itself be likely to alter Lukashenka's thinking that external involvement with civil society should be controlled. Contacts with various levels of Belarusian society are not likely to be more open. Moreover, the EU could face a backlash cost: extending a hand to Belarus might be seen as sending a signal to other EU neighbours that the Union will turn a blind eye to violations of shared values.

C) A THIRD WAY: CATALYSING CHANGE

Both options have strengths and weaknesses. The challenge facing the EU is to navigate between them, drawing on their positive points and offsetting negative ones. Rather than choosing between two extreme options, the EU policy should be active at a number of different levels in order to embed positive change in the region surrounding Belarus and to catalyse change inside the country.

A policy of catalysing change would have two levels.[2]

1) The Regional Dimension

The regional environment around Belarus is a vital component to inducing the transformation of the country. The regional level has two aspects.

-First, Make ENP Work for Ukraine and Moldova

The EU should seek to tie Belarus to the positive changes that are occurring around it in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine and Moldova. In this, it is vital that the *European Neighbourhood Policy* be given sufficient resources to support the movement of Ukraine and Moldova towards greater integration with the EU. Real progress in Ukraine and Moldova would alter the immediate neighbourhood *fundamentally*. Their success would make credible the alternative that the EU could present to Belarus in contrast to other external models. Significant progress in Ukraine and Moldova could act as a magnet to Belarus society and parts of the political elite.

[2] Most of these ideas are not original, but have been inspired by the proposals of EU member states and the work of numerous research institutions and governments. See, for example, the 2004 report of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Efficiency First, Towards a Coherent EU Strategy for Belarus*, K. Pelczynka-Natecz, A. Dukba, L. Poti and V. Vatapek, *The Eastern Policy of the EU: The Visegrad Countries' Perspective* (Centre for Eastern Studies: Warsaw, February 2003); G. Gromadzki and J. Boralynski, *The Half-Open Door: The Eastern Border of the Enlarged EU* (On the Future of Europe Policy Paper no. 2: Warsaw, March 2001); G. Gromadzki et al, *The Enlarged EU and Ukraine – New Relations* (Stefan Batory Foundation with CEPS: Warsaw, 2003); A. Naumczuk et al, *The Forgotten Neighbour – Belarus in the context of EU Enlargement to the East* (On the Future of Europe Policy paper no. 4: Warsaw, September 2001); and *New neighbourhood – New Association: Ukraine and the EU at the beginning of the 21st Century* (On the Future of Europe Policy Paper no. 6: Warsaw, March 2002).

-Second, Raise Belarus in the Russia-EU Dialogue

Belarus must be an element of the EU-Russia dialogue. The EU has sought to place Belarus on the agenda on the political dialogue with Moscow, but with great difficulty because of Russian reticence. The increasing importance of Belarus for the enlarged EU makes it all the more important for Belarus to feature in EU-Russian discussions. The possibility of a future crisis arising there, on the lines of Ukraine or more likely Kyrgyzstan, makes a real dialogue all the more vital. The agreement at the Moscow 2005 Russia-EU summit on a roadmap for building a 'common space on external security' offers an opportunity for increased dialogue on areas 'adjacent' to the EU and Russia. Belarus is a prime candidate.

2) The EU Dimension

There are seven areas of policy for the EU itself. Before discussing these, the EU must abandon the learned helplessness it has developed on Belarus, in which little is done because everything is seen as impossible. The reality is that the EU is already doing a lot that impacts on Belarus. Many member states, and not only new ones, have active programmes supporting civil society, culture, education and health care in Belarus. The EU is a vital trading partner of Belarus. Put simply, the EU already does a lot; it should do more and do it better.

-First, Embed Belarus into the Region

The Polish government proposed before its EU membership that the EU develop an 'Eastern Dimension.' In the evolution of the *Wider Europe* initiative, however, the notion of developing regional cooperation between neighbours lost ground.

While the specific idea of an 'Eastern Dimension' is probably unrealistic, the EU should seek to embed Belarus deeply into the region that surrounds it. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Programmes offer an instrument with which to start developing a regional approach to Belarus that would advance of a range of EU interests at the regional level, such as cross-border issues, JHA questions, transport and infrastructure concerns. These programmes also have the advantage of not being Minsk-centric.

-Second, Develop a Profile inside Belarus

The EU should open an office in Minsk, composed initially of at least three or four Chargés d'Affaires and with the perspective of opening a full delegation. The OSCE is no longer able to stand in for the EU, constrained as it is by a painful wider reform process. Having a presence on the ground would provide the EU with a 'face' in Belarus – without this, the EU does not really exist for Belarusian society. This office would also be important in providing well-founded and up-to-date analysis of domestic Belarusian developments for EU structures.

-Third, Make the Most of EIDHR

One change in EU policy after November 2004 has been the decision to exploit the flexibility offered by the *European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights* (EIDHR) and the Decentralised Cooperation Instrument in terms of funding and supporting non-registered NGOs and undertaking other measures without the explicit support of the central government.

This is vital in the case of Belarus, and must be exploited to the full, including through shifting the allocation of financial resources to EIDHR from TACIS. EU support to the dissemination of independent information in Belarus started in Autumn 2005 with the launch of the EU-funded Deutsche Welle Radio 15-minute daily reports in November (causing controversy for broadcasting in the Russian language) The EU has allocated two million euros for further broadcasting activities in 2006-2008. These measures can only be a start.

Over the longer term, the EU should aim to widen its range of interlocutors inside Belarus to include regional elites, trade unions, business circles and educational centres. Training and assistance programmes directed at these targets are vital for supporting long term institution building in Belarus.

The Commission could also coordinate a EU-wide *Fund for Supporting Freedoms in Belarus*, that would have partial EU funding and member state support, and be open to other sources of financing also.

-Fourth, Be Engaged in the Elections
In the run-up to the 2006 elections, the EU has little choice but to become involved – its absence would only confirm the futility for Belarusian citizens looking towards Europe. To this end, the EU should start negotiating the organisation of an election-monitoring mission with the Belarusian authorities. Even if there is a little chance one will be put on the ground – the symbol of Lukashenka's rejection of international legitimacy matters.

In conjunction, the EU and member states should seek to bolster the visibility and credibility of the opposition candidate. It is very unlikely that he will win, but these elections may represent the opportunity to destroy the pervading image of the opposition as divided, amateurish and ineffective. The opposition campaign should be united, professional and effective - even if it stands little chance of winning. For this, high-level EU statements, speeches and meetings on Belarus and with civil society representatives would be very important.

The transatlantic dimension is vital here. In early 2005, Javier Solana and Condoleezza Rice met jointly with Belarusian opposition leaders. The EU and US should organise more such meetings in the run-up to the elections.

-Fifth, Consider Further Coercive Measures
The EU should also consider how to tighten its pressure on certain leaders of the Minsk regime. The targeted sanctions could be widened to other members of the top leadership. The question of investigating and freezing assets (estimated at several billions of US dollars) held in Europe and abroad by Lukashenka must be considered and raised at a fitting time in a policy of increasing pressure on the top leaders.

At the same time, it is important that the EU combine such pressure with measures to simplify visa regulations for certain categories of Belarusian citizens (scholars, students and members of civil society).

-Sixth, Activate Member State Resources
There is much that the EU can do in Belarus, but member states can do even more. The EU is so constrained by internal regulations on financial allocations that it can become paralysed when working with a state that acts contrary to EU interests and values. Belarus is good example of this paralysis. As such, it is imperative that member states pick up where the EU must leave off.

Member states are already deeply involved in Belarus, with a range of programmes supporting civil society and cultural activities. An inventory should be taken by the EU of member states activities to share information and avoid duplication. The EU could consider framing a *Belarus Task Force*, composed of willing member states, to coordinate policy.

As a whole, increased member state activities could include funding for radio and television broadcasting from outside Belarusian borders, forging ties between European trade unions and Belarusian structures, varied forms of support for the Belarusian opposition. The role for the EU should be to provide a framework for member state activities and to help their coordination.

On a non-political level, EU member states could also consider launching a coordinated programme of cultural exchanges with Belarus where hardly a week would go by without a visit from a European cultural project. Such activities would be important because they would help render the EU less *virtual* for Belarusian society. Such exchanges would also help break down Belarusian isolation.

-Finally, Focus in 2006 on Chernobyl

The Chernobyl disaster occurred on April 25, 1986. Twenty years on, Belarus was the country most severely affected by the nuclear reactor disaster. Twenty-three per cent of its territory is contaminated with caesium-137 at high levels. At the time of the accident, 2.2 million people lived in this area. At the beginning of 1996, 1.84 million people, including almost 500 000 children, still lived in the contaminated territories. As an example of a non-political initiative, the EU could declare 2006 a *Year of Remembrance for Chernobyl* and launch a multi-dimensional programme targeted at Belarusian youth affected and at risk. Discrete programmes for Belarusian youth already exist, but more could be done and with much more fanfare in a way that bolsters EU visibility and credibility in Belarus.