

SIT VENIA VERBO

It is premature to recognize Belarus as a legitimate and full-fledged partner of the EU

Dr. Laima Andrikienė

Vice Chair of the Human Rights Sub-Committee in the European Parliament

Next week, on 16 September the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka will be paying a visit to Lithuania. President Lukashenka will participate in a Lithuanian-Belarusian Economic Forum and will be hosted by the newly elected President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė.

This is the first visit of the neighbouring country's leader to Lithuania in 11 years: A. Lukashenka visited Vilnius in 1997 and later had a meeting with Lithuania's President Valdas Adamkus in Medininkai in 1998. The upcoming event will mark only a second visit of A. Lukashenka to an EU Member State after the EU decided to freeze the travel ban on 36 Belarusian officials, a measure which had been in place since 30 March 2006.

The travel ban, as well as other measures, such as the freezing of bank accounts of Belarusian officials or the political isolation of Belarus had been enacted in response to vote rigging, the persecution of political opposition, and other human rights violations in the country.

It is necessary to note the positive changes in Belarus: political prisoners have been released, and last parliamentary elections saw relatively milder conditions for the opposition. The EU has reacted positively to these changes, an expression of which has been the renewal of political contacts with the Belarusian political leadership, as well as the invitation of Belarus to participate in the Eastern Partnership policy.

It is an imperative to cooperate with Belarus in all areas and at every possible level, i.e. not only with members of the political opposition or civil society but also with the official Minsk. However, such cooperation cannot take place at any cost.

I am convinced that during the visit of A. Lukashenka to Vilnius three main issues need to be pointed out and discussed:

First, cooperation in the areas of business, trade, and energy is beneficial to both countries. Such cooperation would be further accelerated by economic reforms and the improvement of business environment in Belarus. Minsk should therefore take more determined steps towards economic liberalization. The process of privatization of state enterprises, overseen by the president, has to take place in a transparent way and in line with international rules and standards. Statements by the President that the stocks of state companies are kept in his safe only demonstrate that there is no rule of law in Belarus and that the president is above the law. Even more, business restrictions hurt first and foremost the well-being of the Belarusian people, since Belarus is bypassed by foreign investments, it loses potential working places, Belarusian goods are not able to reach foreign markets and local businesses are deprived of access to foreign financial resources.

Second, at the end of 2010 Belarus will be holding presidential, as well as local elections. The interest of Lithuania and the EU is to make sure that these elections are held in line with democratic standards. Only free and fair elections can encourage a more effective and broader cooperation between the EU and Belarus. It is important to remember that despite lesser restrictions during the last parliamentary elections, there is still no single opposition member in the Belarusian parliament.

Third, Viktor Gonchar, Anatolij Krasovskij, Dmitrij Zavadskij, Jurij Zacharenka – these are the names that are to be reminded by the Lithuanian leaders to their Belarusian counterparts. The 16 September of this year will mark a sad 10 year anniversary since V. Gonchar - the former Vice Prime Minister, Vice Speaker of the Parliament and the Head of the Central Electoral Commission of Belarus, as well as businessman A. Krasovskij, went missing. The circumstances of their disappearances are still to be uncovered. Their fate, as well as those of former Minister of Internal Affairs J. Zacharenka and cameraman D. Zavadskij, is not known and the perpetrators have not been punished.

Lithuania and Belarus are neighbours. We are bound by historical, cultural, economic and not least - family ties. That is why Lithuania should seek to create more conducive conditions to foster such ties. One of the primary priorities should be the reduction of the price of the Schengen visa to Belarusian citizens. EUR 60 for the Schengen visa is too expensive for the majority of Belarusians. At the same time, the price for the Russian citizens is twice lower. That is why Lithuania should do everything in its capacity to convince EU partners that visa prices for Belarusians should be reviewed. The EU would not suffer if the citizens of Belarus had to cover only the cost of the visa, which is around EUR 5.

On the other hand, politically we should remain committed to a principled and value-based position. As of today, it is premature and it would be a mistake to recognize Belarus as a legitimate and full-fledged partner of the EU.

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