

## **Policy Department External Policies**

# **ENPI IMPLEMENTATION: THE CASE OF BELARUS**

**FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

July 2008

**EN**



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES OF THE UNION  
DIRECTORATE B  
- POLICY DEPARTMENT -**

**BRIEFING PAPER**

**ENPI IMPLEMENTATION: THE CASE OF BELARUS**

This study was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs .

This study is published in the following languages: **EN (OR)**

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Publisher European Parliament

Manuscript completed on 7 July 2008.

The study is available on the Internet at  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies.do?language=EN>

If you are unable to download the information you require, please request a paper copy  
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Brussels: European Parliament, July 2008.

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## SUMMARY

Belarus is a 'subject' but not a recognised partner within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). EU relations with Belarus are covered by the 1989 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which does not include any provisions for regulatory approximation to the EU's *acquis communautaire*. In the absence of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the EU has not concluded the ENP Action Plan with Belarus. The country is receiving a limited share of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) package from 2007 to 2013 and qualifies for funding under the new European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Stability Instrument and the Non-State Actors and Local Authorities Development programme.

Prior to 2007, the two principal assistance programmes designed to support civil society, human rights and democracy in Belarus (TACIS, EIDHR) have had very limited effects due to their inflexible funding mechanisms. The ENPI continues to require the consent of the Belarusian government and, in effect, operates under even stricter auditing procedures than TACIS. From 2007 to 2013, the ENPI will almost exclusively fund social and economic development objectives in Belarus (including Justice, Freedom and Security, migration and energy sectors), and will only finance democratic development in the sense of teacher, student and business-partner exchanges. Direct support for democratisation measures inside Belarus will be funded by EIDHR, which will be allocating little more than €300,000 for this purpose, while the ENPI national programme budget is set at €5m.

The political context of the implementation of the ENPI remains unpredictable. Whereas the 2006 non-paper issued by the Commission highlights a more proactive approach towards Belarus, the Union continues to lack the instruments as well as sufficiently effective political clout to translate its demands to the Belarusian government and/or to 'win the hearts and minds' of the population. As for the leadership of Belarus, it took some unprecedented steps in demonstrating its willingness to cooperate with the EU in 2008, including the decision on the opening of the Delegation of the European Commission and the release of several internationally recognised political prisoners. However, not all political prisoners were released, and the leadership continues with its heavy-handed practices towards participants of peaceful demonstrations. Most of the EU demands set out in the non-paper have not been met by the Belarusian authorities.

The EU should place renewed emphasis on its initial 'step-by-step' approach through the development of a set of short but concrete non-papers on specific areas of cooperation, each including a list of realistic political reforms in the specific sectors, agreed upon in partnership with the Belarusian authorities. This approach should be based on the conditionality principle. Given the precedent of single concessions on the part of the Belarusian leadership, the EU should re-evaluate the instruments available for its relations with Belarus, as well as the terms of their application.

As far as the provision of financial assistance is concerned, the balance between direct democratisation efforts in the EIDHR and other ENPI priorities needs to be restored. All projects financed under the new financial assistance instruments require better and systematic monitoring as well as coordination across and within EU institutions, specifically in view of their effects on human rights and political civil society.

The EP should develop its internal 'technical expertise' dimension in EU-Belarus relations to complement but, most importantly, to scrutinise the Commission's moves towards a pragmatic step-by-step engagement with the Belarusian authorities on technical issues. In addition, the EP has the opportunity to strengthen synergies between EU institutions by cooperating with the Commission's Delegation, especially in the fields of human rights, democratisation and support for civil society.

# 1. BELARUS AND THE ENP

## 1.1 Belarus' Status within the ENP

Belarus is a next-door neighbour of the EU and a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). However, Belarus does not fully participate in the ENP. Although the country qualifies for limited funding under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), there is no ENP Action Plan in place which serves as a point of reference for the programming of assistance and establishing commonly agreed planning and monitoring mechanisms. Belarus' full participation in the ENP is inhibited by the failure of the country's leadership to undertake democratic reforms, which the EU considers a precondition for reviving and deepening its relationship with the country. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) as well as an Interim Trade Agreement were signed in 1995 to bridge the gap until the final ratification of the PCA by all member states. Between 1994 and 1997, however, the positive trend in EU-Belarus relations came to an end, following the election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a referendum in 1996 to change the constitution and extend his presidential mandate, as well as increasing repression of the opposition, independent media and the judiciary. These developments prompted the European Council to suspend the process of the ratification of the PCA in 1997 and to freeze the Interim Agreement. Since then, EU relations with Belarus remain covered by the 1989 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which does not include any provisions for regulatory approximation to the EU's *acquis communautaire*. The only other legal instrument binding the Union and Belarus is the 1993 bilateral Agreement on Trade in Textile Products. Thus far, the Belarusian leadership has made little effort to improve its human rights record and speed up democratic reforms.

## 1.2 Belarus in the ENP Programme Documents

Belarus already featured as a potential partner in the 'Wider Europe Strategy' in 2002, which was explicitly designed as a response to the challenges and opportunities arising from the new EU Eastern border. The Council of Ministers and High Representative initially highlighted an '*upgrading of the PCA relations with Ukraine and Moldova*' with Belarus being a '*different partner*', yet still a central focus of the Union's efforts to '*engage more actively in resolving problems*' on its '*doorstep*'.<sup>1</sup> The Foreign Ministers at the General Affairs Council (GAERC) in October 2002 even stated the intention of developing enhanced relations with '*Ukraine, Belarus and at a later stage Moldova*'.<sup>2</sup> The 2003 Commission Communication on 'Wider Europe – New Neighbourhood' did not, however, present a clear strategy for engagement with Belarus. It only stated that: '*The EU faces a choice over Belarus: either to leave things to drift – a policy for which the people of Belarus may pay dear and one which prevents the EU from pursuing increased cooperation on issues of mutual interest – or to engage, and risk sending a signal of support for policies which do not conform to EU values*'. The Communication then recommended the Union (prior to the 2004 parliamentary elections in Belarus) to '*engage Belarus in a measurable, step-by-step process focused on creating the conditions for free and fair elections and, once achieved, the integration of Belarus into the neighbourhood policy*'.<sup>3</sup>

Between 2004 and 2006, the European Commission started to draft Country Reports as well as Action Plans for the implementation of the ENP with most partner states, including the

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<sup>1</sup> C. Patten and J. Solana, Letter to the Danish Presidency, September 2002, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> General Affairs and External Relations Council, October 2002.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours, Communication, 11 March 2003, COM (2003) 104 final, p. 15.

Mediterranean and South Caucasus, but excluding Libya, Algeria and Belarus. Still, a renewed emphasis on the ‘people’ of Belarus was clearly evident in the 2004 Commission Strategy Paper: ‘(...) the EU will consider ways of strengthening support to civil society (...) and ‘More can be done in the areas confirmed in Council Conclusions in 1997, in particular to support civil society, democratisation, independent media, the alleviation of problems in the areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster, humanitarian assistance as well as regional cooperation.’<sup>1</sup> Several GAERC meetings highlighted the precedence given to the needs of the Belarusian population with ‘*projects supporting directly and indirectly democratization and democratic forces in Belarus*’.<sup>2</sup> The 2006 Commission Communication on ‘Strengthening the ENP’, however, made no mention of Belarus.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the Commission issued a non-paper in December 2006, which is explicitly aimed at the Belarusian population.

### 1.3 Non-Paper of November 2006

Following the presidential elections in Belarus in March 2006, and the changes in the political situation in Eastern Europe (colour revolutions on the one hand, worsening of relations with Russia on the other), the EU tried to elaborate a new approach towards Belarus. On 21 November 2006, the Commission issued the non-paper *What the European Union Could Bring to Belarus*. Its main aim was to make the benefits of Belarus’ participation in the ENP – such as easier travel, economic benefits, increased cross-border cooperation, improved living conditions, provision of healthcare and education – more explicit. In return, the EU expected the government of Belarus to take democratisation measures, based on a ‘*principled, non-compromising approach*’. The EU stressed that it ‘*cannot offer to deepen its relations with a regime which denies its citizens their fundamental democratic rights*’, and therefore demanded ‘*political, economic and administrative reforms*’.<sup>4</sup> Particular conditions were summarised in a list including 12 items, among them transparent elections, freedom of expression and association, fair treatment by the judicial system, and the release of all political prisoners (See Annex). The non-paper, which remains the main reference in EU-Belarus dialogue so far<sup>5</sup> is an expression of the Union’s governance through the conditionality approach: full participation in the ENP in return for the adoption of political and economic reforms.<sup>6</sup> The leadership of Belarus has, however, rejected the idea of any kind of conditionality-based relationship with the EU.

The non-paper is just one of the instruments in a new, more proactive EU stance towards Belarus, which has been in place since 2004. Following the PACE ‘Pourgourides Report’ on the disappearance of political activists in Belarus, as well as the parliamentary election and referendum in the same year that fell short of the OSCE standards, the Council introduced a set of ‘restrictive measures’ against certain Belarusian officials.<sup>7</sup> This travel ban is now renewed annually and includes more than thirty officials held culpable for the fraudulent elections or involved in the

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper, Communication, 12 May 2004, COM (2004) 373 final, pp. 4 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> General Affairs and External Relations Council, November 2004.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, Communication, 4 December 2006, COM 2006 (726) final.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, What the European Union could bring to Belarus, Non-Paper, December 2006.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, Implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2007, Communication, 3 April 2008, COM(2008) 164, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> G. Bosse and E. Korosteleva, Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Wider Europe Conference, European Parliament, Brussels, 12-13 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Council Common Position 2004/661 CFSP, 24.09.2004, Council Common Position 2004/848 CFSP 13.12.04

sentencing of opposition activists.<sup>1</sup> The flawed presidential election in 2006 led to the Council's decision to freeze the assets of the 'blacklisted' officials.<sup>2</sup> In June 2007, the EU also withdrew Belarus' trade preferences under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), in protest against the violations of trade union rights. Alongside these measures, the EU has supported the European Humanitarian University (EHU) and Belarusian students by providing scholarships (also within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window since 2007).<sup>3</sup> In 2005, the EU also financed a project aimed at enhancing the access of the Belarusian population to independent information sources, namely a radio broadcast initiative.<sup>4</sup> Some member states like Poland initiated programmes complementing the EU initiatives mentioned above, for example the *Kastus Kalinouski Scholarship Programme* (2006), the satellite television channel *BELSAT* (2007), broadcasting in Belarusian, Polish and Russian, as well as *Radio Racja* (resumed 2006). The government of Belarus reacted negatively to such projects, criticizing the EU and member states for interference in its domestic affairs and foreseeing a deterioration in the EU image among the population of the country in connection with sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

#### 1.4 Eastern Partnership Proposal

During the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Brussels on 26 May 2008, Swedish and Polish representatives tabled a proposal calling for a new approach towards the Eastern ENP countries, this time including Belarus. On 20 June 2008, the proposal was welcomed by the European Council, which invited the Commission to proceed with the work and to present the Council with a further proposal for modalities of the 'Eastern Partnership', on the basis of relevant initiatives in spring 2009.<sup>6</sup>

It is not the first time that Belarus has been mentioned in documents advocating particular 'dimensions' of the ENP. The Progress Report of the Black Sea Synergy issued in June 2008 called for Belarus to be '*included in some BSS activities at the technical level*'.<sup>7</sup> Belarus was also mentioned in the Northern Dimension Framework Document adopted in the Helsinki Summit of 24 November 2006, which stated that Belarus '*could be encouraged to participate in expert level coordination in the Northern Dimension framework*'.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to previous initiatives, the Eastern Partnership Proposal invites the EU to engage with Belarus in a more systematic manner. Firstly, the document reaffirms the conditionality principle underlying EU-Belarus relations: '*an enhancement would take place if and when conditions*

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<sup>1</sup> Council Common Position 2006/276 CFSP 10.04.2006, Council Common Position 2006/718/CFSP 23.10.2006. See also: G. Dura, The EU's Limited Response to Belarus' Pseudo 'New Foreign Policy', CEPS Foreign Policy Brief, No 151, February 2008, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Council Common Position 2006/362/CFSP, 18.05.2006.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Commission increases support to Belarusian students studying abroad, 25 April 2008, Press Release, IP/08/643.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Commission to support independent broadcasting in Belarus, 24 August 2005, Press Release, IP/05/1063. The activities carried out by *Deutsche Welle* included 15-minute daily broadcasts Monday to Friday specifically dedicated to Belarus, as well as Internet presentations, with the text of the broadcast and related audio files. In February 2006, the Commission announced financial support for another two-year broadcasting project, which is run by a consortium of Russian, German, Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian partners.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus with regard to the approval by the Council of the European Union of the decision to suspend tariff privileges for Belarus within the Generalized System of Preferences. 03.01.2006. Url: <http://www.belembassy.org/uk/News/070105-mfa-gsp.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Brussels European Council 19/20 June 2008. Presidency Conclusions. 11018/08 CONCL 2, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Report on the first year of implementation of the Black Sea Synergy. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Brussels, 19.6.2008 COM(2008) 391 final.

<sup>8</sup> Northern Dimension Policy Framework Document. [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/north\\_dim/doc/frame\\_pol\\_1106.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/north_dim/doc/frame_pol_1106.pdf)

allow'.<sup>1</sup> According to the document, this principle needs to be strengthened, by 'enhancing' the offer for compliance with EU demands. Secondly, the proposal calls for extending EU cooperation with Belarus at the technical and expert levels. Thirdly, the document acknowledges that Belarus '*has not been embraced by any of the EU multilateral initiatives so far*', and thus suggests paying more attention to multilateral co-operation, which '*would open up an opportunity for the inclusion of various social groups, such as young people, SMEs and junior officials, in the co-operation with the European Union.*'

## 1.5 Position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) regularly draws the Union's attention to the situation in Belarus. Frequent Statements of Chairs and Members of the EP Delegation on Relations with Belarus as well as the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET), of the President, the Vice-President and Chairs of Political Groups confirm the importance attributed by the EP to the situation in the country.<sup>2</sup> Over the last four years, the Delegation on Belarus has gained a reputation as an important source of information on the current situation in Belarus. The AFET provided a platform for discussions on the situation in Belarus as well as for examination of the respective activities of the Council and Commission. In its Resolutions, the EP has constantly expressed concern at the lack of democracy and human rights, urged the authorities of Belarus to introduce democratic reforms, and expressed solidarity with the democratic opposition as well as '*all Belarusian citizens who strive for an independent, open and democratic Belarus based on the rule of law.*'<sup>3</sup> The EP awarded the *Sakharov Prize* for Freedom of Thought twice to citizens of Belarus, to the Belarus Association of Journalists in 2004 and to opposition leader Aleksander Milinkevich in 2006, and regularly invites the Belarusian opposition leaders to Brussels or Strasbourg. The EPP-ED political group organised the *Belarus Week* during Strasbourg's Plenary session in March 2008 on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic, and invited Alyaksandr Milinkevichs, Ivonka Survilla, Yaraslau Ramanchuk, Liavon Barshcheuski and Stanislau Shushkevich. The consultation of the opposition on the 2008 parliamentary elections is among the EP's priorities. At the same time, the EP and in particular the Delegation on Belarus constantly express readiness for dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, and have invited Belarus' Ambassador in Brussels, Vladimir Senko, to their meetings. Nonetheless, attempts by MEPs to visit Belarus and meet representatives of NGOs, the Administration of the President and Belarusian parliamentarians, have always failed in recent years, as the MEPs were refused entry visas.

As for the participation of Belarus in the ENP, the EP emphasized that Belarus must comply with EU conditions in exchange for closer ties. The ENP, which is mentioned in seven out of nine of the latest EP resolutions on Belarus,<sup>4</sup> cannot be fully activated in the case of Belarus. Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup> Eastern Partnership. Polish-Swedish proposal. 23.05.2008. [http://www.euractiv.com/29/images/080523%20polish-swedish%20proposal\\_tcm29-172658.doc](http://www.euractiv.com/29/images/080523%20polish-swedish%20proposal_tcm29-172658.doc)

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Statement of the Chairman of the Delegation for relations with Belarus, Yacek Protasiewicz on 06.05.2008; Statement of the President of the EP Hans-Gert Pöttering 27.03.2008.

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament, Call for Belarus to release political prisoners and end intimidation of the opposition. Resolution, 22.05.2008, P6\_TA-PROV(2008)0239;

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament Resolutions: On the Relations Between the EU and Belarus: The Future Cooperation, 2002/2164(INI), P5\_TA (2003)0042, 03.02.2003; On the Situation in Belarus, P6\_TA(2004)0011, 15.09.2004; On the Political Situation in Belarus after the Parliamentary Elections and Referendum on the 17 October 2004, P6\_TA(2004)0045, 27.10. 2004; On Belarus, P6\_TA(2005)0080, 09.03.2005; Resolution on the Political Situation and the Independence of Media in Belarus; P6\_TA(2005)0295, 07.07.2005; On Belarus, P6\_TA(2005)0363, 28.09.2005; On the Situation in Belarus after the Presidential Elections of 19 March 2006, P6\_TA(2006)0137, 06.04.2006; On the Follow-Up to the Sakharov Prize, P6\_TA(2006)0601, 14.12.2006; On Belarus, P6\_TA-PROV(2008)0071m, 21.02.2008; Call for Belarus to Release Political Prisoners and End Intimidation of the Opposition. 22.05.2008, P6\_TA-PROV(2008)0239.

EP has called on the Commission and the Council to elaborate a financial programme in accordance with the priorities of the ENP, with special attention paid to the support for independent media, NGOs and Belarusian students studying abroad.

Another EP priority is liberalisation of the visa regulations for Belarusian citizens. Even though Belarus did not conclude a re-admission agreement with the EU, and does not fully participate in the ENP, the EP has supported the reduction of visa fees for the citizens of Belarus (currently 60 EUR for Belarusians in contrast to 35 EUR for citizens of neighbouring Ukraine and Russia). According to the EP, *'only such action can help to fulfil the main goal of EU policy towards Belarus, namely to facilitate and intensify people-to-people contacts and to democratise that country.'*<sup>1</sup> However, the EP demands expressed in its Resolutions have not yet been translated into EU policy, even though the EP has managed to attract the attention of particular EU member states.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

### 2.1 Assistance Prior to 2007

EC assistance to Belarus was provided through the Neighbourhood Programmes in 2005-2006 and totalled €10m (€8m committed). The respective Strategy Paper for Belarus focused on (i) support for institutional, legal and administrative reform and (ii) on support in addressing the social consequences of transition, including support to civil society and democratisation, education and training and support to the alignment with international conventions.<sup>3</sup> The majority of projects that have been funded from 2005-2006, however, have prioritised border management (customs control/border crossings) financed under regional and cross-border programme headings. €500,000 was allocated to support the independent press in Belarus<sup>4</sup> and €2m was committed to awareness-raising TV/Radio programmes for Belarus.<sup>5</sup> Both projects were awarded to contracting parties operating indirectly for civil society/democratisation from outside Belarus.<sup>6</sup> A sum of €50,000 was awarded to two contractors in 2007 and 2008 under the 'decentralised cooperation programme' budget line, which is aimed less at civil society than at improving the institutional capacities of local government. Direct assistance for civil society and democratisation was only provided through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR; €5m in total, including €2m transfer from the TACIS budget).<sup>7</sup>

Problems that occurred in the allocation of funding at the grassroots level and/or NGOs include (i) the lengthy registration process for projects, which effectively gave the Belarusian authorities a veto on proposed projects (in particular, projects under the TACIS Annual Programmes, which had already been agreed in partnership with the relevant Belarusian mid-level

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<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, EP Resolution of 21 February 2008 on Belarus, 21.2.2008, P6\_TA-PROV(2008)0071m.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group Countries, 23 April 2008, Czech Republic. The Ministers in particular supported the idea of reducing visa fees and abolishing them for young citizens of Belarus. One needs to consider that member states have a number of instruments at their disposal within their national visa policies. Some of the member states like Poland have already reduced the costs of national visas (35 EUR in the case of the multi-entry, long-term Polish visa).

<sup>3</sup> Country Strategy Paper 2005-6.

<sup>4</sup> The Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung was awarded the contract for a single project over €500,000.

<sup>5</sup> The €2m was awarded to Media Consulta International Holding AG, Berlin.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, EuropeAid, Project Database: <http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/cgi/frame12.pl>, accessed on 15 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> €130,000 'leftover' from the 2004 micro-projects programme, €20,000 for fostering a culture of human rights and €200,000 for promoting the democratic process, plus a number of service contracts under €200,000

authorities, often got rejected by the central authority which refused to register them)<sup>1</sup>; (ii) the very strict auditing rules and regulations of the TACIS instrument and (iii) the requirement that the funds for supported projects had to go through the Presidential Administration Fund (as all foreign assistance).

## 2.2 ENPI, EIDHR and Complementary Financial Instruments 2007-2013

The ENPI replaces TACIS in the new programming period 2007-13. Belarus has been allocated €20m for the implementation of projects within five main components highlighted in the Country Strategy Paper for Belarus:

- (1) Thematic programmes on 'Democracy and Human Rights' and 'Non-State Actors and Local Authorities Development'
- (2) ENPI National Allocation on 'social and economic development including 'actions to alleviate the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe' and 'democratic development and good governance' (€m p/a)
- (3) ENPI trans-national/regional programme
- (4) ENPI-wide programme
- (5) ENPI cross-border cooperation

Although it is now possible to support NGOs located outside Belarus under the thematic programmes, the ENPI mechanism is still not eligible to support non-registered organisations. The auditing rules of the ENPI are, in fact, even stricter than TACIS regulations in respect to the criteria which organisations participating in projects have to meet.

The priority of national allocation under the ENPI is 'social and economic development' (70% of allocations, including energy, transport, JFS, migration and asylum) and 'support for democratic development', which comprises almost exclusively the exchange of students, teachers and business partners as well as capacity-building support for institutions at the level of central government (30% of allocations). The only two calls for tender under the ENPI in 2008 to date focus exclusively on Border Management and Control.

There appears to be growing consensus and recognition at the EU level that the ENPI is not a useful tool to fund bottom-up/ civil society projects, specifically in countries which do not welcome support for civil society.<sup>2</sup> Because of its greater flexibility and direct funding channels, the new European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) is likely to finance the majority of civil society/democratisation projects in Belarus. Unlike the ENPI, EIDHR project funding does not require the consent of the host government. A novel feature of the instrument is the possibility (in theory) of also funding non-registered NGOs.<sup>3</sup> The EIDHR has not yet issued any call for tender in Belarus in the new 2008 funding cycle. It is therefore not possible to arrive at a clear-cut conclusion about the impact of the innovations and changes to NGO funding introduced by the EIDHR. A major part of EIDHR assistance in 2008 is earmarked for ensuring the long-term support of the EHU through a contribution to a Trust Fund as a mechanism to channel future financial contributions from international donors (€1m). Direct EIDHR assistance for human rights, civil society and democratic reforms in Belarus in 2008 is set at €300,000.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Commission Official, Brussels, 6 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> As a side effect of shifting TACIS/ENPI finances towards non-controversial/technical projects, meetings between the Commission and Belarusian line ministries on the first Indicative Programme for the ENPI have become significantly less politicised and therefore more constructive in negotiating project funding for the ENPI's top priority areas.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Strategy Paper 2007-2010, Annex I.

In addition to the EIDHR, two other worldwide external assistance instruments are highlighted in the 2007-2013 Country Strategy Paper for Belarus: the programme for ‘Non-State Actors and Local Authorities Development’ as well as the ‘Instrument for Stability’. Both instruments do require the consent of host governments and it is not clear how the objectives of either instrument relate to the ENPI or the EIDHR in Belarus. The Country Strategy Paper only highlights the complementary nature of the instruments but fails to provide any further details. A call for tender over €1m under the Non-State Actors Programme for actions in Belarus closed in May 2008. A call for proposals was recently issued for the organisation of round tables for the crisis preparedness component of the Instrument for Stability, but that programme is not specifically targeted at action within Belarus. It remains to be seen which (if any) projects will be granted funding for and in Belarus under the Instrument for Stability.

### **3 THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE ENPI IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **3.1 Growing Importance of the EU**

Since the end of 2006, the leadership of Belarus has increasingly found itself under pressure from different actors. In contrast to previous years, the pressure was a lot greater, and concessions on the part of the official Minsk were inevitable. This was especially the case in Belarus-Russian relations, where energy issues dominated the agenda. In particular, in December 2006, *Gazprom* threatened to stop gas supplies via Belarus, unless a substantial increase in price was paid and a joint venture with *Beltransgas*, the Belarusian state-owned gas transmission company, was agreed. Belarus soon gave in and on 31 December signed a protocol on the supply of oil and gas, which set a new price for gas<sup>1</sup> and stipulated the acquisition by *Gazprom* of 50% of *Beltransgas*. The agreement, however, did not prevent further payment disputes between Russia and Belarus, the most notorious of which arose in August 2007. The new *Gazprom* price policy towards Belarus was complemented by new export taxes for Russian oil at the beginning of 2007, which led to another dispute between Russia and Belarus and resulted in a three-day stoppage of the oil flow to Belarus on 7 January. After Russia had rejected Belarusian proposals to build the second branch of the Yamal pipeline through the territory of the country, Belarus’ position became even more vulnerable. In parallel to the disputes between Russia and Belarus, the US hardened its stance towards the leadership and finally in November 2007 introduced sanctions against the large state petrochemical concern, *Belnaftakhim*.<sup>2</sup>

Under these circumstances, the leadership of Belarus started demonstrating appreciation of the EU as its possible strategic partner. The previous antagonistic rhetoric was toned down, and Belarusian high officials stated their willingness to cooperate on issues of common concern, such as combating illegal migration and organised crime. The most important area of cooperation was surely energy transit and diversification. This issue became the core task of Belarus’ foreign policy, and resulted not only in closer contacts with the EU, but also China, Iran, Venezuela and Cuba. Still, the EU was above all the most valuable partner for the leadership of Belarus due to its unique quality to act as a counter-weight to the influence exerted by Russia. Even though the declared improvement

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<sup>1</sup> The new agreement covers the period 2007-2011. The gas price was USD 100 per tcm in 2007, USD 119 in the first quarter of 2008 and USD 128 in the second.

<sup>2</sup> The US Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control froze the assets of *Belnaftakhim* under the US jurisdiction. The measure was targeted at Belarusian officials who undermine Belarus’ democratic processes and institutions and engage in public corruption, including the misuse of public assets. See also: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies Blitz No. 14/2007, 17 December 2007.

of its relationship with the EU was not necessarily an end in itself, the Belarusian government nevertheless needed to pay more attention to EU demands, as well as to come up with credible measures and initiatives which could demonstrate its ability to cooperate with the EU.

### 3.2 Release of Political Prisoners

At the beginning of 2008, the leadership of Belarus released several internationally recognised political prisoners: entrepreneurs Mikola Autukhovich (18.01.08) and Yury Lyavonau (25.01.08), youth activists Zmitser Dashkevich (23.01.08) and Artur Finkevich (05.02.08), the former legislator Andrey Klimau (15.02.08), and journalist Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou (22.02.08). President Alyaksandr Lukashenka stated openly that the prisoners had been released only because the EU had insisted on it. He rejected the idea that any sentences were politically motivated and declared the release of the prisoners to be a 'goodwill gesture'.<sup>1</sup>

With this decision, the leadership of Belarus embarked on an approach which contrasted sharply with its traditional foreign policy line, namely criticizing the EU for interfering in its domestic affairs or simply ignoring its demands. In particular, neither the release of political prisoners, nor any other action was linked to the improvement of the relationship with the EU before. Such a measure by the Belarusian leadership set a precedent of a concession in its relationship with the EU, and given the sensitivity of the area, this was a remarkable event.

However, the release of prisoners as a credible act to improve the relationship with the EU needs to be qualified. In particular, this decision concerned only one of the 12 points on the EU list. In fact, even this one single EU requirement was not completely fulfilled, as the former presidential candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, was not released. As early as February 2008 President Alyaksandr Lukashenka declared the issue of the release of political prisoners to be closed.<sup>2</sup> Further sentences followed in April, May and June 2008, including those given to Andrey Kim, Syarhei Parsyukevich, Mikhaïl Suboch, Pavel Vinahradau, and Maksim Dashuk, for their participation in the Entrepreneurs' Rally in Minsk in January 2008. In the end, nothing has changed concerning the traditional heavy-handed response of the government to participants in peaceful demonstrations.

Events surrounding the release of political prisoners posed the main challenge to the EU-Belarus relationship: there is no measure which Belarusian leadership could take to significantly improve the relationship with the EU without damaging its own power base. The furthest it can go as regards EU demands is to adopt measures that are easily reversible. And yet, at the beginning of 2008, the Belarusian leadership expected to be rewarded for its concession. Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhey Martynau was reported to have said in February 2008 that Belarus expected the EU to remove the names of top Belarusian officials from the notorious travel ban list.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the leadership of Belarus was not simply promoting cooperation with the EU, but cooperation of a very special type, namely one whereby it defines its own conditions, rather than adopting those defined by the EU.<sup>4</sup> However, the EU did not consider the concession made by the Belarusian leadership to be a sufficient precondition for the improvement of the relationship. The European Council and the European Commission called for the '*unconditional release of all political prisoners*' in Belarus,

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<sup>1</sup> *Interfax*, 12.02.2008; RFE/RL, Belarus: Release Of Political Prisoners Focuses On Kazulin Case, 25.02.2008

<sup>2</sup> *Interfax*, 15.02.2008. The statement was also repeated during the President's Annual Address in Parliament on 29 April.

<sup>3</sup> *Belorusy I Rynok, Spiski ne ismenilis (No changes to the lists)*, 14-21.04.2008; RFE/RL, Belarus: Release Of Political Prisoners Focuses On Kazulin Case, 25.02.2008

<sup>4</sup> A. Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira. Opening the European Commission's Delegation in Minsk: Do EU-Belarus Relations Need a Rethink? UPI Briefing Paper 18, 7 April 2008, p.2.

adding that such a move might prompt a review of sanctions.<sup>1</sup> As no positive reaction followed, on 7 April 2008 the Council with its Common Position (2008/288/CFSP, 07.04.2008) decided to extend the EU's sanctions against Belarusian officials by one more year.

### 3.3 Opening of the European Commission Delegation

The background to the opening of the Commission's Delegation in Minsk is set in the GAERC Conclusions of 22-23 November 2004. While reaffirming its policy of limited ministerial contacts in accordance with the EU Common Positions and benchmarks, the Council also highlighted the need for a stronger presence on the ground in Belarus, which would allow *'increasing contacts with the population, NGO and civil society, including through more and better targeted technical assistance using the EIDHR'*. It would also *'enhance the EU's overall presence and visibility in Belarus and communicate and demonstrate the benefits of the ENP to the Belarusian people at large'*.<sup>2</sup> To this list of the Delegation's objectives, the Commission's Communication of November 2005 adds another important point, namely improving *'the flow of information amongst the population on the benefits to be reaped from the ENP'*.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Commission planned to open the Delegation at the beginning of 2006, the agreement establishing the EC Delegation in Belarus was only signed in Brussels on 7 March 2008. The Delegation was planned as a small office, with the Head of the Delegation based in Kiev and visiting Minsk on a regular basis. However, the Belarusian government refused to accredit the staff, claiming that the EU was not staffing the Delegation with the right level of seniority and making it clear that it would prefer a resident Head of the Delegation. The Commission, with the support of member states, claimed that it maintained its right to determine the level of representation at the Delegation. Today, the Delegation is headed by Jean-Eric Holzapfel, a *chargé d'affaires* working under the authority of the Head of the Commission Delegation in Kiev, Ian Boag.

The Delegation of the European Commission in Minsk has a unique position in EU-Belarus relations, because it is placed outside the conditionality framework which otherwise prevails in the relationship. Nevertheless, the position of the Delegation in Minsk is delicate, as it needs to lead the EU towards a *rapprochement* with Belarus, including the authorities, without, however, granting political dividends from the increased cooperation to the regime.<sup>4</sup>

The opening of the Commission's Delegation is an embodiment of an important fact: If the EU wants to increase its influence over Belarus, it may have to behave in a paradoxical way on occasion. In particular, the opening of the Commission's Delegation in April 2008 went hand in hand with the EU prolonging the travel sanctions against Belarusian officials by one more year. Although it may seem contradictory, this particular approach, paradoxically enough, has been and remains the only way to move forward in relations with Belarus.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.4 Technical Meetings Between 'Experts'

Technical or expert cooperation, however limited, has been a relatively consistent feature of cross-border/regional cooperation under the TACIS instrument. The Belarusian Oblast participates in three

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union, Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on Belarus, 7855/1/08 REV 1 (Presse 85) P 41, 31 March 2008; European Commission, European Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner Condemns Sentences to Democratic Activists in Belarus, Press Release, 23 April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, GAERC, 7th November 2005, 13622/05 (Presse 274).

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Opening of a Delegation in Belarus, 16.11.2005, COM (2005) 582 final

<sup>4</sup> A. Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, op.cit., p. 4

<sup>5</sup> A. Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, op.cit., p. 5-6

of the EU's CBC programmes: Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and the Baltic Sea Programme. All three projects continue to be financed under the ENPI. Belarus has hosted several meetings of project selection committees, and co-operation on border crossing/service issues is generally regarded as very constructive.<sup>1</sup> Belarusian experts are also included in technical meetings and training events to address issues concerning the strengthening and reinforcement of asylum, migration and border management standards and capacities within the framework of the 'Söderköping Process'. It comprises an annual senior level review meeting and working level cluster meetings for migration service and border guard officials, as well as non-governmental organisations.<sup>2</sup> The exchange of best practices has led Belarus to start implementing the transition to international standards of border control, namely the establishment of an International Training Centre on Migration and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in Minsk in July 2007 and the ongoing introduction of an automated control system at all border checkpoints.<sup>3</sup>

The Commission appears to be moving towards an approach of technical engagement with Belarus.<sup>4</sup> In its 2004 ENP Strategy Paper, it confirmed that: *'Neighbouring countries play a vital role in the security of the EU's energy supply (...) either as current or future suppliers (for instance, Russia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya) or as transit countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Morocco)'*<sup>5</sup> and highlighted *'regional cooperation and networking (...) in the framework of the 'Söderköping Process', which includes Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.'*<sup>6</sup> The Communication stated that *'if significant positive developments take place in democratisation in Belarus, there is scope for more active engagement with the Belarusian authorities at political level. Contacts between officials at technical level could be intensified and meetings at senior level, such as the Regional Directors' Troika resumed.'*<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the non-compromising approach of its 12-point non-paper, the Commission's recent interpretation of 'significant positive development' appears to be measured against fairly small political steps taken by the Belarusian authorities, such as the release of political prisoners. In January 2008 and following the release of three political prisoners, experts from the Commission met their Belarusian counterparts in Minsk to discuss *'technical matters relating to the energy and transport situation in the EU and Belarus'*.<sup>8</sup> An additional meeting took place at the beginning of February on environmental issues. The areas discussed in these technical meetings range from the identification of joint interests and projects, such as the improvement of safety of trucks, investment plans or Russia's North and South Stream Projects.<sup>9</sup> On the part of the Union, it is usually officials from DG RELEX and the relevant line DGs who participate, together with Belarusian experts at or below the deputy ministerial level. Belarusian partners tend to be very well prepared, professional and committed to not exploiting the meetings for media propaganda.<sup>10</sup> Although these meetings only take place once or twice a year on an *ad hoc* basis, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner acknowledged possible spill-over effects from technical to

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Commission Official, Brussels, 6 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Country Strategy Paper 2007-13, pp. 14-15, for further information: <http://soderkopring.org.ua/page2440.html>. Two Belarusian NGOs are also participating: Belarusian Movement of Medical Workers (Refugee Counseling Service) and Minsk City Bar Association.

<sup>3</sup> Söderköping Process, Belarus plans to meet international standards of border control, Press Release, 24 September 2007 and Migration and Combating Trafficking Centre in Human Beings opened in Minsk, Press Release, 20 July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> G. Bosse and E. Korosteleva, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, Strategy Paper, p. 11

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, Belarus: Commission experts in Minsk for technical talks on energy, transport and environment, Press Release, Brussels, 28 January 2008, IP/08/95.

<sup>9</sup> Another topic of discussion is border management.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Commission Official, Brussels, 6 March 2008.

political cooperation: *'The holding of technical meetings between experts of both sides could lay the ground for substantial cooperation in the framework of full partnership (...).'*<sup>1</sup>

## 4 TOWARDS RENEWING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH BELARUS

The full participation of Belarus in the ENP continues to be hindered by the political situation in the country. The EU's policy towards Belarus will be implemented through different initiatives, programmes and instruments developed both within and beyond the ENP. At hand is a mixture of different approaches, with a tendency towards more pragmatic cooperation on issues of mutual concern. This policy keeps evolving, and the main challenge to the EU in the coming years will be to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of projects implemented in Belarus. The European Parliament has the opportunity to contribute to the Union's policy towards Belarus with its long-standing expertise in this field. This concerns both the cooperation with Belarus in general, and the provision of EC technical assistance.

### 4.1 Conclusions on EU Relations with Belarus

At present, the EU has neither the instruments nor the geopolitical clout to successfully implement a 'principled, non-compromising approach' or to 'win the hearts and minds' of the Belarusian population. Yet, the 12-point non-paper remains the core element of the Union's policy towards Belarus. Such an approach highlights the discrepancy between what the EU demands from the Belarusian regime and what it can achieve in Belarus, and only adds further to the impression of a lack of a clear, coherent and realistic EU strategy within the framework of the ENP. Persistence as regards the 'non-compromising' rhetoric carries the risk of the Union losing credibility in the eyes of the Belarusian population.

To prevent this, the EU should opt for a pragmatic, modest and realistic step-by-step approach, which would signal the political will of the EU to engage with the country and its population. This approach should in particular entail the development of a set of short but concrete **non-papers on specific areas of cooperation**, each including a list of feasible political reforms in particular sectors, agreed upon in partnership with the Belarusian authorities. This approach would be based on a more realistic conditionality principle based on a set of smaller but very concrete steps towards political reform. The current proposal on the Eastern Partnership does already point into this direction, including 'co-operation with Belarus' to 'take place on a technical and expert level – an enhancement would take place if and when conditions allow'.<sup>2</sup> Those conditions must, however, be clearly specified in the future, for example in the form of short non-papers.

Given the precedent of single concessions on the part of the Belarusian leadership, the EU should re-evaluate the instruments available for its relations with Belarus, as well as the terms of their application. For instance, can some high-ranking officials indeed be removed from the travel ban lists, and if so, under what conditions? The EU also needs to consider particular circumstances under which its influence on Belarus would increase. As recent events have demonstrated, Belarus is only responding to a combination of pressures from different sides, with pressure from Russia being a necessary precondition.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Belarus, Press Release, op cit.

<sup>2</sup> Eastern Partnership. Polish-Swedish proposal. 23.05.2008.

MEPs, and especially those belonging to the Delegation for Relations with Belarus, have demonstrated a very good knowledge of the political situation in Belarus, and the EP should build on their expertise. This should be done by paying attention to the recent tendencies in EU policy towards Belarus, such as the emergence of a ‘technical expertise’ dimension in EU-Belarus cooperation. One solution is to foster ‘technical expertise’ on Belarus within the EP in order to scrutinise and advise the Commission on technical cooperation with Belarusian authorities, specifically in view of possible reverse effects on human rights and political civil society. To achieve this, the EP could in particular invite independent experts, representatives of NGOs as well as experts from government circles to the discussions, seminars and briefings held by the EP. Such meetings are already practised by the EP. An example is the hearing ‘Chernobyl Today’, organised by the EPP-ED Group on 4 April 2008, which gathered representatives of the Belarusian opposition, independent experts opposed to the leadership of Belarus and also representatives of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Highlighting this ‘expert’ facet and encouraging a realistic and reciprocal step-by-step engagement with the Belarusian authorities does not mean abandoning the conditionality principle. A step-by-step technical engagement should remain conditional on feasible reciprocal steps being taken by the Belarusian regime.

The EP could develop specific proposals on how to make the **Commission’s Delegation** an active part of the EU policy towards Belarus, especially in the fields of human rights, democratisation and support for civil society. The EP could encourage the Belarusian opposition and NGOs to cooperate with the Delegation and support a campaign **highlighting concrete results of the existing support from the EU**. In particular, achievements stemming from the cooperation with the EU (however restricted) continue to go unnoticed by the population of Belarus. Such campaigns may also draw on the ENP achievements in countries neighbouring Belarus, such as Ukraine and Moldova. The opposition could also be encouraged to support the visa liberalisation process ‘from inside’, in particular by promoting the idea to reduce Belarusian visa fees for citizens of the European Union. Establishing cooperation between the Delegation and the opposition as well as NGOs would avoid sending a signal to the Belarusian population that the Delegation is an exclusive channel of cooperation with the authorities.

## 4.2 Conclusions on the Financial Assistance

Recommendations on EC financial assistance for 2007-13 can only be preliminary. The EU has neither systematically monitored nor evaluated assistance to Belarus and only very few projects have reached their implementation phase. Still, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions and make recommendations on this basis.

The new ‘twin-track’ approach of supporting the goals of the ENP in Belarus based on non-political/technical assistance through the ENPI and support for political civil society in Belarus via the EIDHR, the Stability Instrument as well as the Non-State Actors programme is to be welcomed. While the ENPI’s funding mechanisms are ill-equipped for supporting political civil society and democratisation efforts in Belarus, the revamped EIDHR certainly has the potential to engage Belarusian NGOs more effectively. Nevertheless, the twin-track approach should **ensure a better balance between ENPI and EIDHR** components. Even in 2008, that balance is being jeopardised by unequal financial allocations (€m for the ENPI national programme and only €1.3m for the EIDHR). Within the **EIDHR** itself, better weighting needs to be ensured between large-scale projects located outside Belarus (€m) and the funding of micro-projects in the country (€300,000). A sum of €300,000 annually is simply not sufficient for the *direct* support of civil society and

democratisation in Belarus and certainly inadequate when it comes to increasing the visibility of the ENP amongst the Belarusian population. Given the limited budget and the often difficult direct engagement with civil society on the ground, it is all the more vital to **develop a clear strategy of how to link the EIDHR to the Non-State Actors programmes and in particular to the Stability Instrument**. This would not only enable local actors to better understand the nature of the new instruments and increase predictability, but also help the new Commission Delegation in Minsk to contribute to the planning of projects with local partners in the most effective and strategic manner.

The twin-track approach of financial assistance to Belarus can also lead to contradictions between the objectives of the ENPI (specifically in the areas of Justice, Freedom and Security (JFS) and migration). Such contradictions are easily exploited by the Belarusian regime, for example in justifying the repeated (ab)use of anti-terrorism legislation to arrest political opponents. It is essential that the European Parliament keeps a close eye on 'technical' cooperation on JFS matters in the Cross-Border Cooperation and national programmes for Belarus and **carefully scrutinises individual projects and their effects on human rights and political civil society on the ground**. Short thematic non-papers could help the European Parliament and Human Rights NGOs to closely monitor the priorities and implementation of the ENPI in Belarus.

Alternatively, or in addition, inter-institutional contacts between policy-makers and stakeholders must be improved to ensure a balance and coherence between the ENPI, the EIDHR, the Stability Instrument and the Non-State Actors programme, specifically in view of monitoring the effects of non-political/technical financial assistance.

The recent Eastern Partnership proposal does not foresee additional financial instruments. Instead, *'(...) resources for the implementation of projects, launched within the multilateral co-operation, will come from the already available ENPI resources (including East regional and CBC lines)' and '(...) strengthening the Eastern dimension will be neutral for the EU budget'*.<sup>1</sup> The current proposal is silent on how to adopt the ENPI for the support of democratisation efforts and political civil society in Belarus. The Eastern Dimension must evolve into a strategic concept linking and monitoring ENPI, EIDHR, the Stability Instrument and Non-State actors programme funds in order to add real value to the existing ENP framework for Belarus and to improve the balance and effectiveness of its instruments.

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<sup>1</sup> Eastern Partnership. Polish-Swedish proposal. 23.05.2008.

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## ANNEX

### Extract from the Non-paper 'What the European Union could bring to Belarus'

#### *Measures demanded by the EU:*

- respect the **right** of the people of Belarus **to elect their leaders democratically** –their right to hear all views and see all election candidates; the right of opposition candidates and supporters to campaign without harassment, prosecution or imprisonment; independent observation of the elections, including by Belarusian nongovernmental organisations; their freedom to express their will and have their vote fairly counted;
- respect the **right** of the people of Belarus **to independent information**, and to **express themselves freely** e.g. by allowing journalists to work without harassment or prosecution, not shutting down newspapers or preventing their distribution;
- respect the **rights of non-governmental organisations** as a vital part of a healthy democracy – by no longer hindering their legal existence, harassing and prosecuting members of NGOs, and allowing them to receive international assistance;
- **release all political prisoners** – members of democratic opposition parties, members of NGOs and ordinary citizens arrested at peaceful demonstrations or meetings;
- properly and independently **investigate or review the cases of disappeared persons**;
- ensure the **right** of the people of Belarus **to an independent and impartial judicial system** – with judges who are not subject to political pressure, and without arbitrary and unfounded criminal prosecution or politically-motivated judgements such as locking-up citizens who peacefully express their views;
- end arbitrary **arrest** and **detention**, and ill-treatment;
- respect the **rights and freedoms** of those Belarusian citizens who belong to **national minorities**;
- respect the **rights** of the people of Belarus **as workers** – their right to join a trade union and the right of trade unions to work to defend the people's rights;
- respect the **rights** of the people of Belarus **as entrepreneurs** to operate without excessive intervention by the authorities;
- join the other nations of Europe in abolishing the death penalty;
- make use of the support which the OSCE, the EU and other organisations offer to Belarus to help it respect the rights of its people.