



The Chairman
The Movement for Freedom
Belarus

Minsk, 04 January 2011

Dear Mr. Albertini,

I would like to wish you Happy New Year 2011 and draw your attention, as well as the attention of other EU leaders and EU member-states foreign ministers to the current situation in my country.

The presidential election took place in Belarus on December 19, 2010. Despite some improvements in the overall campaign atmosphere, there were serious breaches of international standards during the vote count. The regime failed to ensure fairness and transparency of the process.

A peaceful demonstration against the rigged election gathered many thousands of Belarusians, but ended with a disproportionately violent crackdown under the pretext of a provocation conducted by unknown persons in plain clothes. About 700 democratic activists, several journalists and seven presidential candidates were arrested, most of them being sentenced to administrative arrests of 10, 12 and 15 nights. 26 opposition leaders and democratic activists, with four former presidential candidates among them, are still kept in the KGB prison. They may face up to 15 years of criminal indictment. Homes and offices of many democratic activists and organizations were searched and had office equipment confiscated.

I would like to express our gratitude for your solidarity with the victims of political persecution and condemnation of the Belarusian authoritarian regime. The Belarusian authorities should immediately release all political prisoners as well as prisoners of conscience and carry out an objective investigation into the assault of the government headquarters as well as the cases of excessive violence towards peaceful protesters.

In response to the human rights violations, the European Union should freeze the relations with the Belarusian authorities until the release of the political prisoner Mikoła Aŭtuchovič, all former presidential candidates and activists detained on 19 December and subsequently. Consideration should also be given to recalling EU ambassadors from Minsk, suspending the participation of Belarus in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, freezing all assistance programmes of European and international financial institutions which are implemented via the Belarusian state agencies and entities.

Renewing and continuing the dialogue between the EU and the Belarusian authorities should only occur when all prisoners are released and there is an end to the politically motivated harassment of democratic activists and independent media.

H.E. Mr. Gabriele Albertini
The Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs
The European Parliament

In communication with the regime of Łukaŝenka, it is very important that the united Europe – national capitals and Brussels – speak with one voice. Taking into account Russia's role in support and international protection of the Belarusian regime, the EU could send a message that cooperation on Belarus should be part of the agenda for the development of the partnership for modernisation with Russia. The EU and Russia's foreign policy objectives in the Eastern Partnership countries should match.

Future EU cooperation plan with Belarus should not focus on the electoral events only. It should also aim to improve the conditions of NGOs, political parties and media activities, as well as the conditions for receiving foreign assistance.

Full attention should be paid to implementing the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, in particular guaranteeing that representatives of democratic candidates are part of the election commissions and ensuring the transparency of the early voting procedure and vote count.

Since, as a rule, economic sanctions hit primarily ordinary people and not authoritarian rulers, they should be applied carefully and pointedly against the enterprises which belong or are directly controlled by representatives of the ruling elite, while announcing important programmes of support for small and medium businesses. Personal visa bans should be significantly extended to include those involved in election falsification (all heads of electoral commissions), illegal detention, beatings and show trials, as well as heads of educational bodies and enterprises who took decisions to expel peaceful protesters from their studying or working places.

Many people in Belarus expect that among concrete immediate steps the EU can make there are offering scholarships for students expelled from universities for political reasons as well as creating a special support fund for those thrown out of jobs due to their participation in the protests.

The most effective response to the political repressions carried out by the regime would be an increase in support for civil society and independent media, including those broadcasting from the EU territory. A very important positive step from the EU would be a unilateral cut of Schengen visa fee for Belarusians from 60 to 35 euros as well as visa obtaining procedure simplification. I think that Poland, by its decision to waive the visa fee for Belarusians, has set a very good example to follow by the entire EU.

In the annex to my letter, please find a non-paper document which reflects my assessment of the latest events in Belarus.

I hope very much that our joint endeavours will bring about necessary positive changes in Belarus and I take this opportunity to assure your Excellency of my highest consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Aliaksandr Milinkevich
Presidential candidate in 2006 election
European Parliament's 2006 Sakharov Prize Winner

Annex

Five years ago during the 2006 presidential campaign Łukašenka had Russia's unconditional support and was in a position of self-isolation from the EU. He was concerned with obtaining legitimacy in the eyes of Belarusian citizens and to overcome the then common democratic candidate from the opposition. He was not particularly concerned about the opinion of the international community.

Before the latest presidential campaign the situation had radically changed. Relations between the Belarusian authorities and the Kremlin became very tense with Russian subsidies abruptly reduced. Dialogue with the EU was under way helping create the basis for support to modernize the unreformed economy. The Belarusian regime seemed to really want the 2010 presidential elections to be recognised by the West admitting that the modernization of the country depended on it.

The atmosphere of the campaign was, for the first time over last 14 years, quite liberal: over 600 foreign journalists were invited, all willing international observers accredited, all candidates registered, free conditions for gatherings and pickets, live TV addresses from candidates and the first, since 1994, live TV debates between candidates.

However, the campaign ended with a bloody crackdown on the opposition. At first glance, such an outcome appears to be unnecessary or even very harmful to the regime and Belarus. Why under the pretext of few broken doors and windows in the government headquarter there was a cruel crushing of peaceful protesters? Why one needed then a previous democracy game for export?

To answer these questions, it is important to bear in mind that there were 3 competing strategies during the campaign: from the opposition, from Russia's special services and from Belarus' special services.

Democratic candidates called citizens to come out to the streets for peaceful protest and to demand a new fair election. It is true that the opposition was unable to prevent provocations which were manipulated by the authorities resulting in its image being damaged within the country and beyond its structures.

The Russian strategy relied on the assumption that Łukašenka is no longer a strategic partner for Russia. For our Eastern neighbour it is important to slow down the dialogue with the EU, to stop the dynamics of pro-western feelings in the society, to diminish the influence of pro-European forces and, if possible, to replace the current ruler with a leader that would keep the country in the sphere of prevailing influence of Moscow.

As early as last spring-summer we were receiving credible information from Russia that Russian special services were training special squads supposed to implement 'Kyrgyz scenario' mass riots on the election day in Minsk. From the beginning of the year 2010, Russian sources had become the main donor of the Belarusian civil society and of main independent press and internet sites in order to break apart the pro-European opposition and prepare large street protest. The Kremlin supported only one part of the opposition that was developing pro-Russian rhetoric and/or saw Russia as a saviour from the dictator.

However, the pro-Russian candidates failed to fulfil the main task of the first stage of the project: to become a centre for uniting the opposition. Moreover, the ratings of democratic candidates were significantly lower than Łukašenka's. So that the objective was reduced to imitating, rather than making, a 'coloured revolution'. It was meant to provoke the Belarusian regime to cruel response which would inevitably lead to the rupture of relations with democratic world and block the country's drifting westwards.

The Belarusian special services were undoubtedly aware of such scenario, being unable to fully prevent it to happen. Furthermore, the regime knew that its support had significantly reduced across the country. As a result, the special services prepared a counter-provocation on the election day: an 'imitated' attack of the government headquarters. As a result, Moscow and Łukašenka have both achieved their common objective: to destroy an important part of the democratic opposition.

The country is now submitted to a large clearing of civil society and political space. However, the party that has profited the most from the situation is the Kremlin. Belarus has gone backwards in its relations with the West and it is again self-isolating from the external world what is in total conformity with Russia's neo-imperial doctrine.

Without a commonly agreed strategy, the Belarusian opposition was used twofold: by Moscow for its provocation and by the regime for crushing the opposition.

Now the Kremlin has greatly simplified the problem of the possible replacement of Łukašenka with a Belarusian 'Yanukovich' who would continue the integration with Russia by giving up economic independence and introducing the Russian rouble. The main Russia's instruments will be the same: gas price, oil export duties, exports to Russian market. After the inauguration of the North Stream gas pipeline and the Baltic pipeline system (BTS-2) for oil transport bypassing Belarus, Moscow will receive additional 'arguments'. For the Kremlin it would be ideal to make such a move before the Russian presidential election of 2012.

On December 19, the Belarusian dictator needed more to keep control over the society than to improve his relations with the West. Łukašenka thinks that the EU would continue the dialogue in any case because of geopolitical calculations. Moreover, he will soon have an expensive item for bargaining – new political prisoners, some of them being even former presidential candidates.

In the coming years, the geopolitical choice of Belarus and the fate of democracy in my country might be decided upon. Much will be dependent upon the courageous endeavours of the Belarusian civil society, the effectiveness of the EU and US support and the coordination of our activities.