

# **Peaceful, creative, inspirational Europe must stand by the Belarusian people**

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In a year of depressing news from Washington, Warsaw, Budapest, Istanbul or Moscow, the peaceful, creative and determined protests of the Belarusian people have been truly inspirational. People from all strata and all age groups of society united in their desire to be free. They must get the strongest possible support.

For this, European governments and the EU need to have a realistic and effective support strategy. Personal sanctions against Belarusian evildoers, strongly worded political statements, and welcoming Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in the capitals of European member states are important, though largely symbolic, actions of solidarity. It would not only be cynical – worse, it would be a mistake – if Europe limited itself to these symbolic measures and regarded Belarus as Russia's backyard.

No regime can stay in power for long, once it has lost its social base in society. That is also true for President Alexander Lukashenko – even with Russian help – and it is probably also understood in the Kremlin. While a weakened Lukashenko might be convenient for Russia in the short run, propping him up will be financially costly and give rise to anti-Russian sentiments in the most Russia-friendly former Soviet republic.

The Belarusian people want good relations with both Russia and the European Union. They should neither be forced or incentivised to make a choice they do not want to make. Instead, European policy initiatives should pursue options that respect the preferences of the Belarusian people and allow them to prevail.

Ideally, Russia therefore needs to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. In the light of the aggressive and disruptive Russian power politics and the many conflicts including cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, outright killings of opponents and of course military interventions in Syria and Ukraine, this may sound ludicrous or at least naïve. But Putin might be far less of a strongman than he would like the world to believe, and with a new US administration, growing discontent at home, and a weak economy, he might see some advantages and need to avoid another conflict with his European neighbours.

Release of all political prisoners, free and fair elections, and the right of the Belarusian people to determine their own destiny are essential demands that Europe needs to support. Furthermore, Europe needs to offer unwavering political and economic support for a democratic Belarus. On the other hand, Russia's security concerns – real or imagined – need to be recognised. In practical terms this means that, while of course Belarus must have the full sovereignty to apply for membership of NATO and EU, neither of the two organisations has any obligation to agree to such a request, and nor should they have any intention of doing so if the request was ever to be made. A robust commitment that NATO and EU membership is not on the cards should be a security assurance given to Russia, but only in return for a Russian willingness to support the right of Belarusians to choose their leadership in free and fair elections. Additionally, an EU offer of economic help for a democratic Belarus should focus on inclusive economic growth, instead of on the typical structural adjustment demands that have done so much harm to people's lives and their confidence in democracy in so many transition countries. The speedy unleashing of market forces integrated many eastern European countries largely as peripheral economies into the EU. The resulting lack of opportunities at home triggered a wave of migration of young people to western Europe that is unprecedented in history. Economic cooperation with Belarus must aim at avoiding a similar brain drain and instead support investment and sustainable growth in the country.

Giving people hope and confidence requires an economic perspective. The EU should therefore offer Belarus unilateral free access to the EU market for a couple of years. A European fund for infrastructure investment, co-operation with the modernisation of municipal enterprises, a joint development bank to promote business start-ups and provision of the macro-financial assistance needed in the short term – without the usual demands for rapid privatisation, cancellation of public services and labour-market deregulation – should be part of Europe's support for a democratic Belarus.

There are lessons to be learned from political changes in other countries. Democratic institutions do not drop from heaven and civil society organisations are not a natural spin-off from spontaneous mass protests. The diverse new movements and protest groups in Belarus need exchanges and friendships with like-minded people from across Europe, especially eastern Europe, to develop their ideas and consolidate organisationally. Otherwise, experience elsewhere shows that democratic upheavals do not issue in democratic societies but instead lead to a political vacuum filled by a web of money, power and corruption. Institutions and civil society organisations both have to be built.

The solidarity of European progressives with Belarus therefore requires two things: direct support for the courageous people in Belarus, and a push in Brussels and the capitals of EU member states for a geopolitically acceptable, and economically possible, positive change in Belarus. If the EU succeeds in this, we can confidently predict that the Belarusian people will prevail and Lukashenko's days as a president of Belarus are numbered. Let's hope that number will be less than 365.