

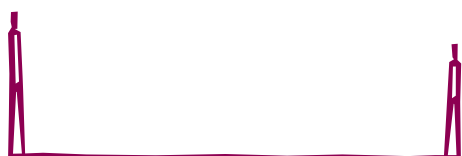
DIVIDED WE FAIL

85

TIME FOR THE EU TO SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE TO BELARUS

Anaïs Marin

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ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
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TIME FOR THE EU TO SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE TO BELARUS



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- Brussels' attempts to draw Belarus closer to the EU have evidently failed. Active engagement with the regime did not result in democratisation nor a rapprochement with the EU any more than the previous policy of isolation did.
- The failure is partly due to persistent divergences within the EU itself: when dealing with Belarus, too many EU members go it alone. Far from being a prudent division of labour, the preference for bilateralism leads to free riding.
- Key to understanding the EU's divisions is how each of the 27 member states perceives Russia's role in the shared neighbourhood. The incapacity to envisage Belarus outside the frame of relations with Moscow is the main common denominator in the EU countries' (too) many foreign policies on Belarus.
- Whatever its national variations, this scheme prevents the EU from building a realistic partnership with Belarus. This trend should urgently be reversed, in fact, since it plays into the hands of the regime and pushes it back into the arms of Moscow.
- To remedy this situation, the EU should not only speak with one voice, but in a language that the authorities understand: pragmatism. Provided that Minsk sets political prisoners free, a roadmap for the conditional support of economic reforms and gradual regime evolution can be negotiated.
- A coalition of the willing should be formed to carry out the task. Regional leadership is needed, but under the supervision of EU member states able to broker the new deal with the Belarusian elites.

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

The West has come to admit that the Belarusian regime is indifferent to incentives and sanctions alike. The crackdown on the opposition that has been ongoing since Alexander Lukashenka's last fraudulent re-election shows that Belarus is drifting ever further away from democratic values and the EU's "ring of friends". Reversing this trend requires EU member states to acknowledge that they bear part of the responsibility for the failure of the engagement policy launched in October 2008.

The purpose of this paper is not to stigmatise any of the parties but rather to point out that the EU-27 collectively failed due to internal divisions. When speaking with one voice was most needed, the incapacity to maintain a critical mass of supporters in favour of a comprehensive policy, whether to "hook" or to coerce the Belarusian regime, led to a brouhaha that was smartly exploited by Lukashenka himself.

The preference for bilateralism in relation to Belarus – and to Russia, for that matter – led contradictory national policies to cancel each other out, consistently undermining the EU's geopolitical positions in the "shared neighbourhood" in the process. Deprived of a coherent and proactive strategy, the EU is "losing" Belarus. This should prompt its members to finally agree on a realistic roadmap for a pragmatic New Deal with official Minsk. And to stick to it together.

The great divide

Internal divisions are a typical feature of the EU's foreign policy-making machinery, but even more so when it comes to Belarus. Considering the range of their respective interests in the region, EU countries could hardly reach more than the minimum consensus on Belarus.

Dividing lines distinguish three different groups. Firstly, for a majority of member states, Belarus is but a remote and unknown post-Soviet country not worthy of much attention. Secondly, at the opposite end of the spectrum, among the concerned few are Belarus' neighbours and other new EU members whose national interests are affected by the situation in and with Belarus. Thirdly, a core group comprises countries whose ambiguous position is the most damaging for the coherence of EU policies: those favouring *laissez faire* merely to avoid offending Russia.

In the first group one finds Southern and small member states such as Greece, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Ireland, Luxemburg and Slovenia, which have limited interactions with Belarus. To some extent Spain, Belgium, Denmark and Estonia share their lack of interest. This objectively implies that a passive majority tends to support a policy on Belarus depending on factors other than genuine concern for the fate of the country. Preference for the Southern or the Eastern vector of the ENP is the main variable that determines their alignment and quest for political dividends within EU coalitions.

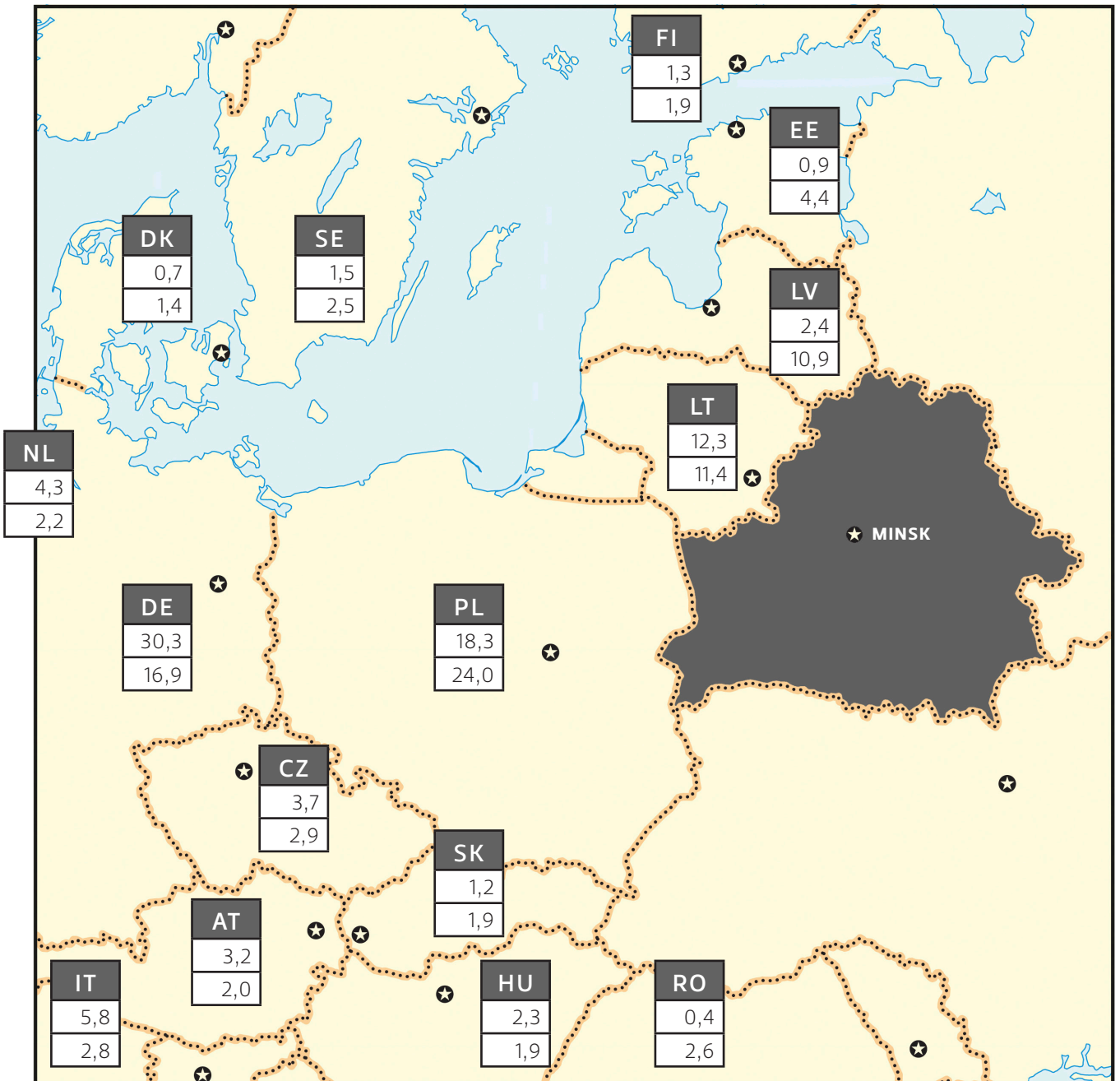
Nothing new here, but it is of critical importance in the case of Belarus since Brussels has no contractual basis and therefore no institutional framework for official dialogue with Minsk. Following Lukashenka's 1996 "constitutional coup", the EU froze multilateral relations with the highest representatives of the Belarusian government. This opened the door to individual free riding, unofficial negotiations and *ad hoc* coalition-building.

A discredited dual leadership

Of all the EU members, Poland and Lithuania rank Belarus the highest on their national agendas, albeit for different reasons. Common to both – and also to Latvia – is the fact that neighbourhood relations with Belarus preceded the Europeanisation of their foreign policy. In other words, when bilateralism does not allow them to reach their goals, they turn the issue into a multilateral one and lobby for other member states to follow their stance. Conversely, when the EU's common foreign policy threatens their national interests, they revert to bilateral frameworks. Illustrative of this strategy of "customising" the EU is the way Warsaw (dis)solves its minority issue within the EU, turning the Belarusian regime's attacks on the Union of Poles of Belarus into a human rights problem for the whole EU.

Belarus is clearly a priority of Poland's Eastern policy, the aim of which is to tap into Poland's experience of transition to promote and supervise the integration of Eastern neighbours into Euro-Atlantic structures. Pursuing this goal in the name of the EU is a way for Poland to fulfil its historical regional leadership aspirations. The task also implies containing similar ambitions of Germany and Russia, and on occasion uniting with one of them against the other.

Belarus's main EU trade partners (2010)



Source: Eurostat, author's calculations.

FI	Country code
1,3	Share of total EU27 exports to Belarus (in %)
1,9	Share of total EU27 imports from Belarus (in %)

The 2007 Polish-German rapprochement, for example, served as a platform for a broader Warsaw-led coalition including Sweden, the Baltic states, the Visegrád countries and Ukraine to condemn Russia's August 2008 intervention in Georgia.

The Five-day war triggered a radical policy change in the EU. From then on, Poland advocated engagement with Lukashenka's regime as the lesser of two evils, the worst being that "an isolated Belarus could become completely ensnared by Russia", because that would "jeopardize democratic transformation and – more importantly in Warsaw's view – dash hopes that Belarus could become a buffer state between Poland and Russia".¹

With this in mind, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski convinced his EU homologues to endorse the idea of resuming the dialogue with Belarus, virtually without conditions. He thus set them on a risky course which hit a wall on 19 December 2010: having pledged a €3 billion EU assistance package to Lukashenka should he hold free and fair elections, Radosław Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle were ridiculed 6 weeks later when Lukashenka duped the West once again.

Polish opposition leader Jarosław Kaczyński holds Sikorski personally responsible for this affront to the whole EU. In an article entitled "Sikorski lost Belarus"², he deplored the fact that Polish "unprofessional" diplomacy had neglected to maintain contacts with the most pro-Western segment of the Belarusian opposition, notably with Alexander Milinkevich, who ran for president in 2006 but not in 2010 for lack of Western support. In urging EU countries to back Vladimir Neklyayev instead, whom he (wrongly) assumed was pro-Russian enough to satisfy both Moscow and those in the EU who refrain from interfering in Belarusian affairs for fear of irritating the Kremlin, Sikorski picked a candidate who had little chance of uniting the opposition behind him and beating Lukashenka.

1 Wikileaks cable dated 12 December 2008, quoted by Daneiko, E. (2010) "EU-Belarus: political adventurism or politics as the art of the possible?", *Bell* 11(21), p. 3.

2 "Sikorski przegrał Białoruś", *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 February 2011. See also Kaścian, K. "Does Poland Really Know Belarus?", *Transitions Online*, 4 March 2011.

Adding to the internal divisions of the Belarusian opposition itself, the issue of which opposition party or leader to support is a recurring cause for dispute among Western countries. It divides the transatlantic camp between hard-liners (the US, the UK and the Netherlands) which refuse to engage in dialogue with the Belarusian authorities and openly support grass-roots opposition forces, and the defenders of a more balanced "dual track strategy" which advocate maintaining channels for critical diplomatic dialogue with official Minsk. Within the latter group, the accommodating stance of Lithuania drew the most critics lately. Walking in the footsteps of Silvio Berlusconi, in 2009 President Dalia Grybauskaitė started openly courting Lukashenka on the grounds that he is "the best guarantor of Belarus's independence" (read: against Russian neo-imperialist appetites). Indeed, for many in Vilnius the Belarusian opposition represents a threat. Should they come to power, Belarusian nationalists would surely challenge some founding myths of Lithuania's statehood, if not its territorial integrity.

Opportunism thus dictates Lithuania's position on Belarus. The two countries are economically and culturally interdependent, as statistics on tourism and movements of people illustrate. In 2010, no less than 3.5 million border-crossings were registered at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Minsk and Vilnius are less than 170 km apart, making the Lithuanian capital a shopping and business centre for the Belarusian middle-class and Minsk-based entrepreneurs. These linkages, together with Lithuania's dependence on Belarusian raw materials and transit facilities, explain Vilnius's blocking of EU sanctions against the regime.³

What ensues is a paradoxical situation that puts pressure on the Lithuanian policy-makers. On the one hand, Realpolitik dictates an interest in a "stable, prosperous and sovereign" Belarus. Hence a recent deal for the Klaipėda seaport to handle Venezuelan oil cargoes, courtesy of which Lukashenka intends to limit Belarus's energy dependence on Russia.

3 During the last EU Council meetings, Lithuania vetoed the adoption of economic sanctions against key Belarusian companies which are also vital suppliers for the Lithuanian economy. It also refused to follow the 14 OSCE member states which on 6 April activated the "Moscow mechanism" to request an independent inquiry on post-electoral violence in Belarus.

On the other hand, in trying to “hook” Lukashenka’s Belarus as a bulwark against Russian encroachment in the region, Vilnius runs the risk of not only offending the Kremlin but also Russian business interests, known to have percolated through the Lithuanian establishment over the years.

The “Russia first” bias

Most of the remaining EU countries concerned with the fate of Belarus consider that Belarus indisputably belongs to Russia’s sphere of interests. This stereotypical conception implies that for the sake of maintaining the geopolitical *status quo* they dismiss any attempt at “unbundling” Belarus from Russia’s embrace. As far as they are concerned, EU policies on Belarus should acquire Moscow’s prior approval or even be implemented through Russian mediation.

Originally a German approach, the “Russia first, Russia only” doctrine has spread due to inertia within the EU bureaucracy. It traditionally dominates in the diplomatic establishment of the Big Three (Germany, France and Great Britain), but also partly orientates the Eastern policies of Italy and countries dependent on Russian energy supplies, such as Slovakia, Austria and Finland. The problem is not only that this doctrine biases their understanding of Belarus to the point that it actually plays into the hands of Russia – assuming that the latter’s interest is indeed to put an end to Belarus’s sovereignty. The “Russia first” principle also favours free-riding tactics which thwart joint initiatives and undermine solidarity within the EU family, to the detriment of smaller or “newer” member states, as the launching of Nord Stream revealed some years ago.

The foreign policies of Germany and France provide ample evidence of this trend. Be it to safeguard their business interests or to spare Russia’s susceptibilities, their handling of the “Belarus dilemma” has been ambiguous indeed. In October 2008 for example, the German ambassador to Minsk was the only European diplomat who attended the inaugural session of the newly-elected Belarusian Parliament, despite a prior consensus with his peers to boycott the ceremony to denounce electoral fraud.

Dominant in the French diplomatic apparatus as well, the “Russia first” tropism has also led Paris to turn a blind eye to the Belarusian regime’s authoritarian

behaviour. Paris failed to criticise the conditions of Lukashenka’s last re-election: the Quai d’Orsay did not issue any official statement and the only disapproving words were uttered by the Ministry’s spokesperson in response to a question from a journalist during a press conference on 20 December. For the record, that same week French diplomats were busy negotiating with Moscow over the sale of Mistral-class warships to Russia. The fact that Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie did not add her signature to the column William Hague and Guido Westerwelle published on 28 January in the *Wall Street Journal* to condemn the violent crackdown against the opposition obviously reduced the diplomatic impact of this pamphlet and was favourably received in Minsk as well as in Moscow.

The extent of the damage

In failing to reach a consensus on a comprehensive strategy in its own ranks, the EU has put itself in a bad light: incoherence, duplication and the thwarting of common policies deprived Brussels of most of its levers against the Belarusian regime, the latter always being quick to identify and play on the EU’s divisions. The extent of the damage caused by this brouhaha is easy to assess from the perspective of at least three failed policies: strategic thinking, engagement and sanctions.

Firstly, the EU lacks a joint strategy on Belarus because efforts to devise a comprehensive regional framework for drawing Eastern neighbours closer to the EU were stymied by members making concessions to Russian sensitivities. Hence the fate of the 2003 Polish-Lithuanian “Eastern Dimension” initiative, in which countries blinded by the “Russia first” golden rule perceived a Russophobic *idée fixe* on the part of Poland. Five years were wasted on policy circumvolutions before the idea of a South/East differentiation of the ENP became mainstream again. Thanks to the backing of Sweden, but also to the August 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict which prompted the Council to quickly adopt a regional containment policy, Poland’s revamped initiative passed the test and became the Eastern Partnership (EaP). From the outset, the EaP lacked legitimacy, however, due to the conspicuous absence at the Prague launching summit on 7 May 2009 of major EU leaders apart from Angela Merkel and Donald Tusk.



Sergey Lavrov, Bernard Kouchner, Radosław Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle at the Weimar Triangle and Russia meeting of foreign ministers in Paris, 23 June 2010. Photo: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.

Secondly, restoring the dialogue with the Belarusian regime in October 2008 was a hasty and uncoordinated decision. Taken outside of any long-term strategic frame, this tactical step was decidedly premature: of all 12 conditions set by the EU in its November 2006 non-paper, the authorities had fulfilled only one (liberating three political prisoners), while the 28 September parliamentary elections had again fallen short of meeting OSCE standards. Against this background, Poland's insistence on lifting the visa ban against the regime's cronies was an unjustified concession. Far from encouraging Lukashenka to democratise, this unilateral gesture of goodwill bolstered his popularity at home and provided him with undue legitimacy abroad. This accommodating stance consistently undermined the coherence of the EU's value-based message, obviously marred by double standards. It also alienated part of the Belarusian pro-European forces, which deplored the fact that the EU was less concerned with Belarus's democratisation than with its geopolitical orientations, since from then on the EU's condition was merely that Lukashenka should refrain from recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁴

Thirdly, the current return to coercive diplomacy will certainly prove fruitless as well: national divergences hinder the unanimous making of strong enough decisions or compromise their

implementation. The restrictive measures voted in by the Council on 31 January are obviously "too little, too late". To be effective, severe sanctions should have been introduced immediately after the violent dispersion of street protesters and the arrest of opposition candidates. This was advocated by the European Parliament, which on 20 January unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the Council to follow Washington's example and introduce targeted economic sanctions against the companies closest to the Belarusian regime. Defended by Polish, British, Dutch, Swedish and Czech diplomats, the idea of an embargo, however limited, was originally rejected by Germany, France, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Spain and Portugal.

If the intention was indeed to suffocate the regime, the attempt should have been coordinated and timely, as the EU is no longer in a position to negotiate now. Having *de facto* expelled Belarus from the EaP, it does not have much left to offer, and returning to conditionality, be it "soft" (carrots) or "hard" (sanctions), will only discredit it further.

United in diversity – can the EU rise to the challenge?

Up until now, the EU's policy on Belarus has developed as a by-product of Russia-Belarus relations and in response to external factors, such as the 2008 Russia-Georgia war or the 2010 cooling down of Russian-Belarusian relations. On both occasions, Lukashenka used the "Russia first" tropism of some

⁴ Denis Melyantsov (2010) "Belarus-EU: protracted normalization", *Belarusian Yearbook 2009*, Minsk: BISS, p. 70.

member states to outplay the West and remain in power. Now is the time for a realistic diagnosis and a strategic shift towards a more proactive stance.

The EU should take responsibility for its oversights and use what little is left of its leverage to negotiate a step-by-step regime transformation that will not threaten Lukashenka personally. Political liberalisation, if not regime change, could follow suit by way of a spill-over. If EU countries step up efforts to support the embryonic Belarusian civil society, the wind of change might even blow from within it sooner than expected: for the first time ever, pro-EU views prevail in Belarusian public opinion, indicating that a mindset change is already underway.⁵

To avoid missing its chance, the EU has to stop balancing between value-based discourses and pragmatic interests. The latter have long dictated a tacit shift in EU foreign policy towards Realpolitik, whereas democratic ideals, contradicted from within by free riders, fail to convince. Not only is it time for EU countries to speak with one voice, they must also speak Lukashenka's language, be as pragmatic as him, and admit that there must be, as he claims, spheres of shared interests in which Brussels and Minsk may engage in mutually beneficial cooperation on an equal footing.

Advocating a compromising attitude towards official Minsk will, of course, turn Belarus into yet another litmus test for the ENP's declared democracy-promotion mission. However, returning to the *status quo ante* of coercive diplomacy would make the EU prone not only to losing face, but also to losing Belarus altogether. The unwavering dictator still has a trick or two up his sleeve: if both Russia and the IMF raise the bidding to grant him loans, he may well turn to China instead for support.

Belarus is currently facing a dramatic economic crisis. This implies that Russia's pressure on the country to liberalise and open its market readily constrains the regime to make concessions, at least on the economic front. However, structural reforms also

require foreign investments and modern technologies that the West is in a better position to provide. Ensuring that European companies can participate when the privatisation of Belarusian industrial assets gets underway is the most efficient way for Brussels to stay in the race. No doubt EU companies with business interests in Belarus will support the project. This active economic engagement should help safeguard Belarus's statehood against the appetites of corrupted Russian capitalism while also promoting good governance standards, at least in terms of business culture.

The EU should therefore present the Belarusian government with a concrete offer to deepen economic cooperation in return for a gradual regime transformation. The deal should be straightforward and plainly stated: liberal reforms in exchange for Western support for Belarus's statehood. The only non-negotiable condition for opening the deal is that political prisoners should be acquitted and released.

Time for a New Deal

As a sign of goodwill, the EU should make a unilateral move that will surely meet the Belarusian population's expectations and leave Lukashenka abashed: visa liberalisation for *bona fide* travellers. This would not concern regime cronies on the visa ban list, but millions of other Belarusians could benefit from the measure. Over the past months neighbours have waived visa fees on a bilateral basis, namely for "national" (category D) visas, whereas a pricey €65 tariff remains for Schengen visas. And yet, this document is the EU's most visible "window-pane", showing how serious Brussels really is about facilitating people-to-people contacts to encourage democratisation at the grass roots.

Negotiations on a Visa Facilitation Agreement started last February, but the process is a lengthy one that may take up to two years to complete. Meanwhile, the EU should offer a reciprocal 50% price decrease for Schengen visas and accelerate the implementation of the small cross-border traffic agreements recently signed with Belarus's neighbours. Building on the positive experience of the Schengen visa centre operating in Chisinau, a similar centre could be opened under the auspices of the EU Delegation in Minsk.

5 An independent survey revealed that in March 2011 over 50% of respondents would prefer Belarus to join the EU rather than unite with Russia. This is a 20-point rise compared to the aftermath of the 2006 presidential elections. Cf. www.iiseps.org/press15.html.

Secondly, the EU should turn its weakness into a strength by rationalising the existing division of tasks among its members. Guidelines should be agreed upon and fixed in a roadmap assigning clear leadership to a coalition of the willing. Poland, which assumes the presidency of the European Council on 1 July, will surely take the lead. Considering the fiasco of Sikorski's previous policy, however, his EU counterparts should not let Poland go it alone: Germany and Sweden should be the other pillars of this open coalition, which might even include France, should the recent trend for reactivating the Weimar Triangle cooperation be confirmed. As for Lithuania, it can use its resources of trust in Belarus to restore the dialogue with the authorities. Its EU partners should ensure, however, that Vilnius uses its current chairmanship of the OSCE for the common European good, which is to foster electoral reforms in Belarus ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections, and not for more selfish purposes.

To prevent free riding, roles should be distributed between *planners*, responsible for drafting a long-term strategy together with the Commission and the European External Action Service; *promoters*, to maintain dialogue with the most reform-minded segments of the Belarusian bureaucracy⁶; and *brokers*, able to sell the deal to Moscow (Slovakia could play such a role) and to Washington (this could be the task of Hungary, which is calling for enhanced transatlantic cooperation on Belarus). To supervise this new deal, coordinate EU and national policies and embody the EU's unanimous voice, a special representative for Belarus should be appointed. His task would be to negotiate with the ruling elites in each relevant sector, within a standing committee open to those members of the opposition ready to resume dialogue with the authorities.

Thirdly, the EU should rethink the value-based dimension of its neighbourhood policy. The reluctance of Belarus to embrace democracy should encourage a further differentiation between Eastern Partners in terms of the incentives, rewards and sanctions contained in the EU's "offer". Nonetheless, the EU should reactivate multilateral democracy-promotion instruments and platforms (such as the EaP Civil Society Forum) to encourage regional

cooperation, benchmarking and good governance. Implementing the European Consensus on Democracy and reactivating the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which offers flexible and efficient mechanisms to support civil society in countries where NGOs are prevented from functioning freely⁷, is a priority. Here again, stepping up efforts requires and enhances coordination between sponsors. The Civil Society Stability for Belarus project recently launched by the Nordic countries shows that some regional initiatives can quickly be turned into deeds. Following up on the Solidarity with Belarus International Donors' conference organised in Warsaw on 2 February 2011, similar meetings should be arranged to see to it that democracy promotion in Belarus remains high on the West's agenda, notwithstanding the shift towards increased pragmatism advocated here.

7 Řiháčková, V. (2010) "A long and winding road? The quest for 'flexible' EU democracy funding", PASOS Policy Brief 2.

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6 Jarábik, B. (2011) "Belarus beyond sanctions", FRIDE Policy Brief 72 (April).