



REPORT



KAS EUROPEAN OFFICE BRUSSELS

„The Eastern Partnership – opportunities for Belarus“

Dinner-Roundtable with Aliaksandr Milinkevich on 1 February in the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

The lecture of Aliaksandr Milinkevich focused on the impact of the Eastern Partnership on the current political situation in Belarus. Milinkevich supported an enhanced dialogue between the EU and Belarus in the framework of the Eastern partnership and warned of policies of (self-) isolation.

According to Milinkevich, the recent EU policy has led to a couple of cautious reforms: However, those reforms were made in the economy, also under the influence of the economic and financial crisis. A political liberalization was still missing. On the economic level, there were also signs for an opening: Thus, Belarus had started negotiations for a closer cooperation with the other countries of the Eastern partnership; another aim was the enhancement of cooperation with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Economic reforms were also necessary due to the decreasing competitiveness of the economy.

As a first step towards political liberalization, Milinkevich called for the freedom of press and particularly the internet, the control of which has been tightened this month. Still, political parties as well as trade unions were only able to work under very difficult circumstances. There were substantial problems especially with the registration of NGOs or parties. In this context, Milinkevich highlighted the importance of the local elections in April 2010. However, the government had introduced several changes to the electoral law and was also trying to push its own candidates into the electoral commissions. There were only few opposition representatives; 10% of opposition representatives in the electoral commissions would already be a success. There was no need for fixed quotas for opposition representatives in local councils and parliaments. What was needed, were simply free and fair elections.

According to Milinkevich, the Eastern Partnership was both the way to democratisation and a guarantee for the country's independence. The EU had an important role to play in democratisation and economic modernisation. Thus, dialogue between the EU and Belarus had to be continued, but it should be based on common values. Conditionality should equally be applied to international credit loans. Both the reform efforts in the economic area, but also a change of mind in the population were signs of hope: For the first time more people had expressed the wish for a closer integration with Europe than with Russia.

Milinkevich underlined the importance of good relations with Russia: A large part of the population (approx. 50-60%) supported a closer partnership with Russia, but without giving up sovereignty. Only a very small part of the population was in favour of a union with Russia. Moscow was eyeing the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership with distrust and perceived as a “canalisation of Anti-Russian influence” (Medvedev in 2009). The Kremlin was putting Minsk under considerable pressure. The Northstream pipeline would weaken Belarus position as a transit country. A flexible policy of the EU towards Belarus was therefore very important.

The international European Forum in November 2009 had tried to unify and strengthen the pro-European forces in the country and had also tried to give visibility to this movement in Belarus. Milinkevich underlined that it was crucial to bring European integration and its benefits closer to the citizens. One of the principal aims should be the consolidation of a pro-European stance in the population.

Milinkevich outlined three possible scenarios for the future development of Belarus: The optimistic scenario would see a unification and consolidation of democratic forces; first on a local level, later in the parliament. For this, EU support was very important; otherwise the movement might be marginalised. The second scenario would be the Azerbaijanisation of Belarus: the “opposition” would be completely controlled by the government. Such a scenario would mean stagnation. A third scenario might include uprisings as a consequence of the economic crisis. However this would not be protests organised by the democratic opposition but chaotic riots. Such violent protests would rarely lead to democratisation, but would favour the rise of dangerous populists. This might also threaten the independence of Belarus. Therefore, support for the democratic forces by the EU was crucial for the stability of Belarus. A dialogue - based on conditionality - with the government had to be maintained. A fruit of this dialogue was also the fact that Belarus still had not recognized South Ossetia or Abkhazia despite of immense pressure from Moscow.

The chairman of the Belarus delegation of the EP, **Jacek Protasiewicz**, underlined the importance of a close dialogue with Belarus and stressed the parallels between Poland’s situation in the 1980s and the current situation in Belarus. Back then it had been decisive that the West had spoken with a single voice, the same unity was needed today for Belarus. Like Milinkevich, Protasiewicz was in favour of the 5+5 composition of the Belarus delegation to the Euronest Parliamentary assembly, which he described as a good compromise. Again, Milinkevich drew a parallel to the Polish experience: The elections of 1989 had been only half-free and half-democratic, however they were the first step towards the country’s democratisation. Like in Poland during that time, government and opposition were divided between hardliners and reformists. Therefore it was crucial to keep up both the dialogue with the government and the support of the opposition.

MEP Gunnar Hökmark outlined two differences of the current situation in Belarus to Poland in the 80s: First, back then Poland did not have an “example” for its transformation process. Furthermore, Belarus had also the

REPORT

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Ukrainian example. In the years after the orange revolution, Europe had failed to give Ukraine a perspective and to be an active partner in the transformation process. This could be a bad example for the transformation process in Belarus.

During the discussion, Milinkevich outlined that the government in Minsk was not a monolithic block. There were reformists as well as hardliners. One reformist was the head of the presidential administration Uladzimir Mikei as well as a group inside the National Bank. The hardliners were not primarily in the military or in the police forces, but rather in the high management of big enterprises. These people had benefited most of the lacking liberalisation of economy and the political system.

The Eastern Partnership has already lead to considerable improvements. The number of imprisonments was shrinking; repression still existed, but was now more hidden. The Movement for Freedom could now be registered. However, this right was still denied to most of the civil society organisation. Milinkevich urged the EP to insist on a mixed delegation of government representatives and opposition members for the Euronest assembly. This would also promote the internal dialogue between the government and the opposition.

According to Milinkevich one reason for the strong position of Lukashenka was the fragmentation of the opposition. It was difficult for the citizens to see a clear alternative to the current president. In discussions and polls, many were backing Lukashenka, because they did not see an alternative personality or an alternative programme. One main aim was therefore to canalise the opposition forces and draft an alternative programme. The European forum in November had been an important step in that direction. In the population, this pro-European way was supported by the high educated, young, urban population with access to the internet. One could win the hearts and minds of the entire population by promoting trans-border exchange on all levels, as 60% of the population had never been in the EU. Hereby he criticized the EU's visa policy in the past.

Olaf Wientzek