
JUSTAS PALECKIS: «EUROPE SHOULD USE EVERY CHANCE TO BUILD A DIALOGUE WITH MINSK»

An exclusive interview of the deputy, member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament

By the results of a recent session of the ministers of foreign affairs of the EU, Brussels threatened the official Minsk with sanctions if the 2006 presidential elections are not just and democratic. The proposed sanctions include enlarging the list of the regime officials who will be rejected visas, as well as freezing of bank accounts of the Belarusian leadership. However, Belarusian officials hardly ever visit the West at all. Besides, they are not so naïve so as to keep money within the reach of Brussels. Then, how effective will these hypothetical sanctions be?

- J. P. I think that enlarging the list of the regime officials who are banned to visit Western countries would have, rather, a tangible moral impact. This would emphasise that Belarus in the modern Europe looks like «a white crow» because of its leadership. Moreover, the country is not represented, for example, in the Council of Europe. As regards freezing of the bank accounts, then, probably, this sanction could affect interests of some Belarusian officials. As far as I know, the general trend is that they prefer to keep money in more stable and financially reliable places, i.e., conventionally speaking, not in the East, but in the West.

But probably, these sanctions will be too late following the election campaign in Belarus, won't they? Independent experts are stating unanimously that you should not expect just elections in this country. Approaching the election day, the authorities are methodically «protecting» the public and political field against a small group of opponents, including party entities, independent mass media and nongovernmental organization... After the elections, there may remain only a scorched earth, and the democratic Europe will have nobody to support. Then, perhaps, it is useful to «speed up» the issue of sanctions?

- J. P. We need to analyse the reaction of Minsk after this statement of Brussels. As far as I know, ministers of foreign affairs of the European Union were planning to return to this issue in January. Everything is not that simple. On one hand, the European Parliament is liberal with rigid assessments and radical proposals related to the Belarusian issue. On the other, it is always more difficult to act than to make declarations. The European Commission has a specific responsibly — which is not a small one.

The European Commissioner on foreign relations Benita Ferrero-Valdner has repeated spoken in this respect before our Committee on Foreign Affairs, as well as before the entire European Parliament. We always feel that the European Commission wants to give the Belarusian authorities some chance to correct their behaviour. In other words, it leaves an opportunity to take steps towards democratization and observance of human rights, as is expected by Europe. And if the Belarusian official leader is radiant with optimism and assuredness in the victorious outcome of the elections for him, then the following question is grounded: Why not to ensure the game according to the rules? Why should he resort to different restrictions for the

opponents, if he can win fairly? I think that Brussels has not yet abandoned this way of posing the question.

The problem of introduction of economic sanctions is even more delicate. As you known, this issue is under discussion in the institutions of the European Union. However, here Brussels will weigh up all «pros» and «contras» especially thoroughly. This is known to be a double-edged sword. Besides, it is important to preclude the following: we meant to hit the ruling top, but primarily the lower layers suffered.

What is your attitude to the initiative by the deputy of the Lithuanian Parliament Vaclov Stankevič, who thinks that Lithuania should initiate a dialogue with Belarusian leadership so as to push it towards democratization, in particular, of the laws on election and mass media? There is widely spread view among politicians and analysts that the Belarusian regime sees these jesters only as a sign of weakness of the opposite side.

- Vaclov Stankevič is a recognized expert in the Belarusian situation, both among the Lithuanian politicians and in Europe as a whole. I always listen very attentively to his opinions. I think that the proposals of the deputy Vaclov Stankevič deserve attention. Moreover that the approaches used before have not given any results.

However, the attempts to establish, conventionally speaking, more trustworthy relations with the official Minsk have also been a fiasco. For example, after the known story with the attack on the Belarusian Union of Poles you can hear that many politicians in Warsaw saying: we have been wrong trying to be kind with the Minsk regime, hoping to correct it little by little — it seems that dictatorship recognizes only one language, the language of force.

- **J. P.** Now, there are new political forces in power in Warsaw, and they can review a rather broad range of foreign policy lines. As regards Vilnius, I think that the concept, supported, in particular, by the deputy Vaclov Stankevič, has every right to exist and some chances for success. Let us recollect: at the time of cold war the West was speaking even to Stalin, let alone Khrushchev or Brezhnev. In this connection, we can point to the eastern policy of the German Chancellor Willie Brandt. He tried to have a duologue with GDR, Poland and the Soviet Union, appealing not only to high principles of human rights, but to elementary common sense as well. Were it not for this dialogue, if the idea of a total isolated prevailed, then Gorbachev would hardly have appeared. So, I think Europe should use every chance to establish with Minsk such a dialogue in terms of elementary common sense.

Speaking about the problem of support of Belarusian democrats and civic society: isn't Europe here a hostage of its excessive political correctness? Don't they take too close, in Brussels, to the mechanism of traditional procedures which require, in particular; that foreign aid projects be coordinated with the government? Critics say: look, Belarusian authorities have blocked in fact all channels of legal aid from outside and they play without any rules! Some European politicians have ideas about how to avoid such barriers. Thus, the Vice Speaker of the European Parliament Janusz Onyszkewicz suggests creating in the EU institutions a more flexible mechanism, i.e., a fund for support of democracy. Perhaps, Western democracies and the European Union as a whole should be more flexible, given this Belarusian specific?

- **J. P.** Without going into details of such ideas, I would like to notice that the European Parliament has free hands for suggesting such ideas. However, the European Commission is

under the pressure of responsibility. They also, I presume, take into account the Russian factor. In principle, here we see a normal democratic system of checks and balances in action. The European Parliament pushes forward, while the European Commission to some extent keeps down these impulses and at the same time listens to the voices of free Parliamentarians. As a result, we often have the golden mean — a balanced way of solution. Thus, for example, the idea of development of independent radio broadcasting for Belarus was born precisely in the European Parliament. And after a while, following discussions, it was materialized in the decisions of the European Commission.

You mentioned the Russian factor. Indeed, Brussels regularly appeals to Moscow in the «Belarusian issue». But they receive no positive response. Recently, the Russian MIA have made another statement about disagreement with the EU attempts to present Belarus «as a sort of problematic area in terms of democracy». Don't you have an impression that appeal to Moscow asking to help in democratization in Belarus is nothing else, but «a voice of the one crying in the wilderness»? Or, they give homage to some ritual, given the fact that Belarus is within the tacit area of influence of Russia? Indeed, Russia is a strong player in this area; moreover, it pumps huge amounts of gas and oil to Europe. Therefore, in opinions of some Belarusian analysts, these pragmatic considerations take precedence in Brussels when they weigh up risks of aggravating conflicts with Moscow in relation to the Belarusian issue. Do you agree with this?

- J. P. Yes, of course. Russia stretches over Belarus its protective arm. And this is understandable, in a way. Firstly, Russia itself is criticised for violations of human rights. Secondly, Belarus is among its allies, which are not very numerous now. On the other hand, for Moscow it is not very reasonable to be interested in having a regime that compromises Moscow as its ally.

The European Commission, on the initiative of the European Parliament (also thanks to your personal efforts), is gradually developing projects of radio broadcast for Belarus. However, there are polemic spears broken around them, too. In particular, Belarusian nationalists castigate the «German Wave» for the organization of relevant programmes in Russian. However, the main issue of efficiency of broadcasting. It is considered of low quality, by technical and other reasons. At the same time, it looks as if Europe pays much less attention to Internet opportunities, as well as to support of independent press and independent journalists in Belarus itself. How do you perceive the role of the EU in the issue of freedom of speech for Belarusian people and giving them independent information?

- J. P. I think that radio broadcasting is a rather efficient way of information. I myself listen even now, for example, to the Russian service of «Radio Freedom» and find a lot of useful information. And the targeted broadcast for Belarus will be even more effective. As regards Internet, yes, you are right, we have to think along this line, to press on the European Commission to have relevant aid project elaborated. No doubt, aid should be given to independent mass media in Belarus itself. Moreover, that, being abroad, for example, in Germany, no journalist can tell about the situation and events in Belarus as convincingly as the person who lives in this country.

One known figure of the Lithuanian culture, who has visited Belarus, has shared with me the following observation: the current regime in Belarus reminds the regime in Lithuania before 1940. At that time, we had as the ruler Antanas Smetona who came to power as a result of a coup. He introduced censorship, a one-party system, and ruled the country without any parliament, but later he allowed electing a one-party parliament... In brief, there are many similarities. But if the system of power created by Smetona was not very much different from what we had in the pre-war realities in the Old World, then the current Belarusian regime, which, in many respects, is a rollback to the past, is, of course, an eyesore of the modern Europe.

At the same time, we should recognize that Belarusian authorities, as Smetona did many years ago, are very tricky in using the nostalgia of some part of population for paternalism and strong hand. By the way, such feelings can be seen in new countries of the European Union. Some people perceive democracy there as ineffective, and they wish to have someone, big and strong, to take care of their daily life.

However, for Lithuania and other EU countries, fortunately, the Rubicon has been crossed and the rollback to a dictatorship is impossible. In Belarus, the today system of power, with support of Moscow, demonstrates a reserve of vitality that is surprising even for many experts.

- **J. P.** Going back to historic similarities, I would like to emphasize: the force of authoritarianism is deceiving; such regime is a colossus with feet of clay. The Lithuanian President Smetona, though he concentrated in his hand huge powers, managed to have, in fact, everyone against him during his 14 years of rule. Therefore, in 1940, it was rather easy for Moscow to create in Lithuania a vision of all-round support for the Soviet power. Putting it differently, authoritarianism turned out to be detrimental for the Lithuanian independence.

The official Minsk always tells the West: do not teach how to live; we have invented our own Belarusian model of development, and we go along our own way.

- **J. P.** I agree that there are no ready-made solutions. Probably, there may be unique ways for a worthy life of the people. But for me, there is no any doubt that the basic rules of the game must be observed. They are well-known. It is alternative democracy, human rights, freedom of press, etc. If Minsk started moving along this line, I think a positive mutual response of Europe would follow at once.

Questions were asked by Aleksandr Klaskovsky. 28.11.05.

THE EUROPEAN UNION FACES A NEW CHALLENGE IN THE «BELARUSIAN ISSUE»

Champions of a flexible dialogue with Minsk are under a shower of criticism

The united Europe has long been trying to find approaches to the so-called «Belarusian issue». The regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko is obviously falling out of the standards culti-