

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-

vated by the European Union in the field of democracy and human rights. Attempts to push the country leadership towards mitigating the domestic political situation have not brought any visible results. At the same time, the official Minsk demonstrates a surprising indifference towards threats and temptations, equally. Figuratively speaking, the ruling top is not impressed by a whip or a carrot from the West.

What should be done? The most indicative in this respect are the discussions held in Vilnius, the capital of one of the new EU states, located literally 2 hours drive from Minsk, the bastion of the «last dictatorship in Europe», as it is described by the irreconcilable opponents of Lukashenko. Last autumn, in Lithuania, we could hear rather loud voices of politicians who suggested a more flexible approach to contacts with the Belarusian leadership.

We should remind here the following: the European Union, which has very serious claims to the official Minsk, some time ago proclaimed the «policy of restricted contacts» with the Lukashenko regime. In particular, the EU country leaders were not recommended to have meetings with top officials from Belarus. The consequences of such approach are very well felt by the President Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has not been invited, for many years, for official visits to the states of the united Europe. However, these restrictions are known not to have pushed the Belarusian leadership to mitigate the realities of the regime, whose authoritarian character is recognised by the head of the state himself.

Champions of a more flexible line in the «Belarusian issue» have the following logics: as long as the previous approaches have not given any results, we should try to find other ways to mitigate political ideas of the top rulers in Minsk. It is easy to understand that economic relations with Belarus are very important for Lithuania. In particular, transit of Belarusian cargo is a good source of income for its treasury. Lithuanians are not against the idea that the neighbouring country uses its territory for shipping potassium fertilisers to the port of Klaipeda. In general, pragmatic interests of Vilnius play not the least role in the above discussions. (We shall add in brackets that other EU countries are also active in developing trade with Belarus, though at the same time they criticise its political realities, which allows some opponents of Lukashenko to speak about «double-faced West», which, allegedly, «nourishes the dictatorship».)

Then, at the beginning of October, there was an event which caused an ambivalent response among European politicians. And it shocked the Belarusian opposition members. The Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas met with his Belarusian counterpart Sergey Sidorsky. As it was written in the Warsaw newspaper «Rzecz Pospolita», «during the inauguration of the Belarusian trade exhibition, which was decorated by a huge portrait of the smiling Aleksandr Lukashenko, the heads of the governments discussed in a good spirit plans for the future trade cooperation».

However, not everyone shared this indignation or irony. For example, the deputy of the Lithuanian parliament, an ethnic Belarusian Vaclov Stankevič, stated that «our governments must cooperate, simply speaking, to the full extent. I am sure that this will help to begin the process of democratisation in Belarus in a much faster way». Later, in early November, Stankevič, in a special statement, called on the politicians of his country to initiate a dialogue with Belarusian authorities so as to push them towards gradual mitigation of domestic politi-

cal realities. According to the deputy, first, it would be advisable to suggest that Minsk should democratize the elections legislation and the law on mass media. And this was not a single voice. For example, the Lithuanian member of the European Parliament Justas Paleckis in his interview «Wider Europe» also emphasized that Europe should use all possible chances to start with Minsk «a dialogue from the position of elementary common sense».

However, soon after that, the Belarusian authorities made some actions that looked as an open challenge to the West. In particular, it was an offensive against the remaining non-governmental press and adoption of strict amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedural Code. Now, a number of independent publications are deprived of the opportunity for being disseminated through the system of retail sales and subscription, which is, in fact, the monopoly of the State. The Criminal Code was supplemented by the article «Discrediting of the Republic of Belarus», which stipulates deprivation of freedom for criticism of the local reality.

Analysts made a conclusion that the ruling top understood, in its own way, the lessons of the «colour revolutions» and decided to preclude repetition of a similar scenario by preventive tightening of the nuts. And now, the supporters of the flexible dialogue with Minsk were under a fire of criticism. In particular, the Lithuanian deputy to the European Parliament Vitautas Landsbergis, in his interview to the radio «Freedom», stated that amendments to the Belarusian criminal law is «a return of Stalinism» and that «talks about any kind of dialogue with the official Belarusian authorities only encourage Lukashenko to take further steps to strengthen the dictatorship». Landsbergis suggested that now the European Union should take more rigid sanctions against Belarusian authorities.

Meanwhile, independent political scientists in Minsk share the opinion that neither Europe nor USA are ready for a serious game in the Belarusian political field. The European Union is concerned with its own problems of enlargement, while George Bush is stuck in Iraq. Besides, the observers stress that the Lukashenko regime is under protection of the Kremlin and the European capitals are not eager to start confrontations with it, given the dependence of the West on the supplies of Russian energy resources. They prefer, by inertia, to appeal to the Russian leadership, asking to help in the attempts to mitigate the Belarusian regime.

It is indicative that the very experienced diplomat Hans-Georg Wick (the former head of the Advisory OSCE group in Minsk), having put aside any diplomacy, called the idea of cooperation between the EU and Moscow in terms of Belarus democratization as foolishness. In the article published on 5 December in the Austrian newspaper «Press», the German politician strongly criticized the line of Brussels in the Belarusian issue. In particular, he criticized a declarative, rather than real, support of democratic forces in the country and the delusive hopes attached to the Kremlin.

Polish politicians also call on the European colleagues not to step on the same rakes, repeating old mistakes in their approaches to the Belarusian problems. Warsaw is known to become under a cold shower, trying to establish with Minsk some special neighbourhood relations — as it was with Vilnius. Suffice it to remind the much-featured story with the «taming» of the Union of Poles in Belarus, as well as a number of incidents when Polish politicians and journalists were not allowed to the country.

However, in Belarus itself, independent analysts hardly believe in that the EU will be able to use some range of effective measures against the official Minsk. According to experts' prognosis, the matter will be, rather, reduced to usual rhetoric, and, possible, some insignificant, rather symbolic, sanctions that are below the threshold of sensitivity of the local ruling top. Indeed, on one hand, the adoption by Minsk of «anti-revolutionary amendments» in the Criminal and Criminal Procedural Codes caused a quite predictable response from the West. Washington, Brussels and other democratic capitals were concerned and indignant; they made a disappointing diagnosis (the dictatorship is gaining strength) and called on the Belarusian authorities to rethink. On the other hand, the latter are hardly that much short-sighted so as not to have presumed indignation of the international democratic community after adjustment of the legislation in the Soviet style (in the time of the USSR, they put people into prison for «anti-Soviet propaganda and campaigning»). What is left is, to presume that the threatening rhetoric of foreign (as well as of domestic) champions of democracy does not scare Lukashenko very much.

The democratic community of Belarus is also openly disenchanted by the EU information project oriented to the local public. It is obvious now that the relevant programmes of «German Wave», aired from October last year, have not become an event for the local public. The programmes are very short and are difficult to tune using short-wave radio receivers (young people prefer FM radio). It is indicative that the discussion about the language used in the programmes has come to nothing (initially, nationalists were very indignant at the fact that the programmes were in Russian, i.e. the language of the «empire»). It has become clear that the new project has not, in fact, concerned the audience, and therefore, no need to break the spears. Local analysts started to say that Brussels has simply ticked the event. Putting in differently, it has formally reported to members of the European Parliament who, from time to time, adopt resolutions including items on expansion of independent information for Belarusians.

Meanwhile, the unexpected appointment of the presidential elections for March 2006 has made the Belarusian issue more relevant on the European agenda. According to some analysts, Aleksandr Lukashenko and his environment decided to pre-empt, being afraid that the West, in its strive to facilitate democratisation of Belarus, might use some new technologies that the regime could not fully resist. On the other hand, it is indicative that the elections in Belarus were appointed on the second day after the meeting between Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin in Sochi. The latter also confirmed the Russian readiness to supply gas to Belarus in the new year on the 2005 conditions. That is, at the price of 46.68 USD per thousand cubic metres. This is especially impressive at the background of the price at 220–230 dollars which was ostentatiously presented to the «orange» Ukraine. Such economic preferences given to the official Minsk on the eve of the election campaign cannot be interpreted but as an explicit support of the current Belarusian regime by the Kremlin. With all frictions between Putin and Lukashenko (which has been a secret of Punchinello since long), this regime is in the eyes of the Russian leaders a bastion for confrontation to «colour revolutions» in the area of geopolitical interests of Moscow. A very convincing is the version that Vladimir Putin is interested in the Belarusian elections being held before the G8 summit to take place in St. Petersburg next June. Otherwise, the Russian leader would, obviously, have a serious pressure from Western partners

in the Belarusian issue. But in this event, he can reply in the spirit of the Russian saying: «what is the use of brandishing fists after the fight». Due to this, the Belarusian analytical community raises the question: will the West be able to adequately respond to the transfer of the elections date and put the problem of democracy before the Kremlin in a proper way?

It is known that in November ministers of foreign affairs of the European Union made a statement in which they warned Minsk about possible troubles if steps are not taken to create conditions of just elections. In particular, what is meant is the enlargement of the «black list» of Belarusian officials who are banned to enter the European Union and freezing some bank accounts. The EU Council of Ministers promised to return to this issue in January. So, the Belarusian observers say that it will be possible soon to assess the degree of consistency in its actions. Another thing meant is organization of observation during the presidential elections in March, a clear assessment of the election campaign and conclusions of international democratic community in relation to future action strategies on the Belarusian issue.

In is clear that it is difficult to make significant shifts in the internal Belarusian political situation in a brief period. However, the international context of these elections will, for sure, determine a lot as regards the prospects for democratization of the country.

Ales Pramen. 22.12.05.