

POLITICAL

184 PCNP 11 E bis
Original: English



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

SUB-COMMITTEE ON NATO PARTNERSHIPS

BELARUS – A DIFFICULT PARTNER

REPORT

DANIEL BACQUELAINE (BELGIUM)
RAPPORTEUR

International Secretariat October 2011

Assembly documents are available on its website, <http://www.nato-pa.int>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. DOMESTIC ISSUES	1
III. REGIONAL SECURITY AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS	3
A. RUSSIA	4
B. BELARUS-EU RELATIONS	5
C. BELARUS-NATO RELATIONS	7
IV. CONCLUSIONS	7

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Though sharing borders with three NATO member states, Belarus has not been high on the agenda of the Alliance. However, because of its geographical position, the country plays an important role in European stability. Moreover, Belarus serves as an important energy corridor between Russia and Europe. Although Minsk has a close, if sometimes difficult, relationship with Moscow, it is a NATO partner country and participates in a number of its programmes. Co-operation remains limited, though, and Minsk's crackdown on the opposition following the latest presidential election in Belarus has minimised the chance for short-term improvement in its relations with the West. The latest wave of revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa highlights the need for a continuous and serious assessment of the evolving situation in Belarus. This report examines Belarus' foreign and security policy, its relations with the Alliance and with its neighbours. The paper also briefly refers to the latest domestic developments in the country and includes some recommendations for a conditions-based policy of engagement with Minsk.

II. DOMESTIC ISSUES

2. As one of the Soviet Union's successor states, the Republic of Belarus gained its independence in 1991. The current president, Alexander Lukashenko, founder of the faction "Communists for Democracy," came to power on a populist platform in 1994, following the short rule of Stanislav Shushkevich. Belarus' political decision-making system is highly centralized and the regime is authoritarian. The main power levers in Belarus are in the hands of the President who has sweeping executive authority. Notable experts and public figures, such as former US President George W. Bush, have described Belarus as the "last remaining dictatorship in Europe". Presidential powers were significantly increased by constitutional amendments in 1996 and again in 2005, when presidential term limits were removed altogether. The President exercises unchecked control over the bureaucracy, including the security apparatus, the military and the law enforcement agencies. The constitution states that presidential decrees have more binding legal force than ordinary legislation. Political parties play only a marginal role in the country's political process. More than two thirds of the candidates registered for the 2008 parliamentary election were not affiliated with any one political party but were non-partisans loyal to the government. No opposition party made it to the National Assembly during the last elections. As Dzianis Melyantsou shared with the Political Committee during the 2010 Annual Session in Warsaw, there is no viable opposition to counter Mr Lukashenko's rule. In fact, the opposition lacks unified leadership and the party structures are only poorly developed. One of the reasons why the opposition remains weak and divided is that a large part of the economy is state-controlled, thus providing the President with the financial means to constrain any party perceived as a threat to his power.

3. Civil society in Belarus is weak and has no firm hold. The government places severe limits on media freedom. Belarus ranks 154th out of 178 countries according to the Press Freedom Index of "Reporters Without Borders". The vast majority of print media in Belarus is state-owned, with a small number of privately-owned newspapers of limited circulation. Print media outlets are obliged to register with the state press distributor. In 2010, Belarus ranked 127th on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, with a score of 2.5 while Freedom House characterizes it as "not free".

4. Despite its authoritarian character, the regime enjoys a modicum of domestic approval, which is largely contingent upon the artificial sustenance of the economy and only presents a vague reflection of the economic fundamentals. Mr Lukashenko's carefully crafted image as Belarus' indispensable leader has been considered favourably by the broader audience, especially among rural constituencies. Although waning, his popularity owes to the fact that the regime provides some, if little, stability in uncertain times and the fact that Belarus has remained relatively shielded

from the economic malaise experienced in Russia or Ukraine following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the most part, the social contract in Belarus can be described as the exchange of basic economic survival for political loyalty and restraint from social activism.

5. In comparison to the other successor states of the former Soviet Union, Belarus has, so far, enjoyed notable socio-economic stability. State-owned industries employ more than half of the population - unemployment is very low and there is little income inequality. The state offers generous social services in the form of healthcare, pensions, education and others. The economy is centrally managed, with a heavy industrial base that is largely unreformed (contributing to approximately 52 % of the country's GDP). However, the economic picture is deteriorating fast and it seems unlikely that Minsk will be able to maintain current levels of economic and social stability - rising inflation and a steep decline in the country's foreign exchange reserves have put increasing pressure on the government.

6. The latest report on Belarus conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development reveals that the country is experiencing a "severe balance of payments crisis, triggered by large direct lending, rapid growth of public sector wages and pensions, and loose monetary policy."¹ In May 2011, Belarus devalued the ruble by 36%, which led to an increase in import prices and caused panic among the public. Instead of allowing a rebalancing of domestic and external demand, the government exerted greater control over the currency and consumer markets, a move that was anticipated to add more stress to the financial framework, which witnessed 44 per cent inflation in June alone. The multiplicity of currency exchange rates is seen as one of the drivers for inflation, which is projected to average between 55-75% by the end of the year. The country's hard currency reserves have fallen by \$100 million over the past month alone.² The head of the Belarus Ministry for macroeconomic analysis predicted that consumer prices would continue to soar. Furthermore, basic commodities have disappeared from the shelves, prompting consumer hoarding, as producers choose to sell their products in neighbouring Russia, where the currency is stable.

7. Rating agencies, such as Moody's, downgraded Belarus's foreign and local-currency government bond ratings, making them the lowest-rated in Eastern Europe. Moody's also forecast that the ruble may soon decline by as much as 50% against the US dollar. In late August, Mr Lukashenko surprisingly announced that he would let the ruble float starting in mid-September, declaring his intention to defend the currency, adding that Belarus anticipated a \$ 5 billion loan, although he did not specify its origin. The IMF had also urged Belarus to float the ruble and close the gap between the currency's multiple exchange rates. In May 2011, Belarus requested a substantial loan from the IMF, which had extended a total of \$3,46 billion to Belarus in 2009 and 2010 under its stand-by agreement. The outcome of the IMF negotiations is not yet clear but denying Minsk a much-needed loan could further boost Moscow's influence. While Mr Lukashenko seeks to display a certain level of control over the situation, analysts indicate that the crisis is only in the initial stages and that it is far more deeply-rooted and systemic than a short-term recession.

8. The 2010 presidential elections and the ensuing political repression put an end to the cautious steps towards economic and political liberalisation that had been taken in the second half of 2009. Assessing the conduct of the last elections, international observers concluded that "Belarus has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections". While the 2010 campaign represented an improvement upon previous elections campaigns, problems remained. Noting that the government did not conduct a transparent vote count and did not allow opposition parties to monitor that count, the OSCE election monitoring team categorised the vote counting in nearly half of the constituencies as "bad or very bad".

¹ EBRD.

² <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2011/09/06/moodys-belarus-ruble-to-fall-up-to-50>

9. In the ensuing crackdown, police arrested approximately 700 people, including seven of the nine presidential candidates. Forty-two were charged with organising a riot, an offence carrying a prison term of five to 15 years. Soon after, Belarus decided not to renew the mandate of the OSCE Office in Minsk, which was forced to cease its operations. The crackdown prompted the European Union (EU) and member states of the Alliance, including the United States and Canada, to impose travel restrictions and asset freezes upon President Lukashenko and 170 other top Belarusian officials. In contrast, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev congratulated Alexander Lukashenko on his victory.

10. Since early June 2011, protesters in Belarus have resorted to utilizing social media such as VKontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook. An Internet group called “Revolution through the Social Network” has been organizing weekly demonstrations, taking the form of silent marches, with protestors playing a single tune on their mobile phones while clapping in unison. The security forces have arrested a number of protestors and the government passed a degree banning clapping in public. In his public address on Independence Day, on July 3, 2011, Mr Lukashenko denounced efforts to “destabilize” the country and pledged to quash any attempts to “copy a coloured revolution” in Belarus. Almost 400 people were detained after the protests during the Independence Day celebrations. In response to the protests, the Belarusian parliament has drafted a new law providing for sanctions for “organized inactivity.”

11. With regard to the continuing detention of several activists arrested after the December elections, the Observation Mission of the International Committee for Monitoring the Human Rights Situation in Belarus has accused the Belarusian authorities of violating a number of UN treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners adopted by the UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in 1955. At the time of writing, the UN Human Rights Council is scheduled to hold a meeting on the situation in Belarus during its 18th session.

III. REGIONAL SECURITY AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS

12. Regarding Belarus’ strategic objectives, the Foreign Ministry of Belarus stresses that “co-operation with nations and international organisations [...] is vital to encourage sustainable development and support [its] lucrative export potential”. Furthermore, the Ministry highlights that Belarus’ foreign policy is based on ‘non-discrimination’, a term which is largely used to justify interaction and arms deals with “the world’s pariahs”.

13. Belarus’ regional role is important, given that it is a key transit point for migrants and is essential for the channelling of oil and natural gas from Russia to Europe. Although it is Russia’s strongest regional ally, Minsk has pursued a foreign policy that ensures its independence and territorial integrity. Straddled geographically between NATO and the EU to one side, and Russia on the other, Minsk has pursued varied tactics, trying to play one against the other while remaining open to engagement with whoever suited Minsk’s interests.

14. A long-standing issue of concern has been Belarus’ role as an international weapons exporter. Although the volume has declined, Belarus remains an important arms supplier to numerous autocratic regimes around the world. There have been various reports of formal or unconfirmed deals made by Belarus to Syria, Palestinian groups, Sudan as well as Libya and Ivory Coast, which are currently under a UN arms embargo. Between 2004 and 2008, two-thirds of Belarus’ arms exports went to Africa, and more specifically to Sudan, which accounted for 40% of Belarus’ total arms exports. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Belarus is currently supplying weapons to Libya despite the UN arms embargo. In an interview with Reuters, SIPRI arms trafficking expert Hugh Griffiths said that “SIPRI can confirm, based on

our sources, aircraft landing in Libya carrying military equipment that come from Belarus, and that Gaddafi's aircraft, his executive jet, has been flying from Libya to Belarus”.

A. RUSSIA

15. Belarus has close historical and cultural ties to Russia and efforts to establish a political and economic “union” between the two countries have had substantial public support in Belarus. However, public attitudes in Belarus demonstrate a subtle shift regarding Belarus’ political future. According to recent polls, conducted by the Belarus Independent Institute for Social and Economic Research, public support for unification with Russia dwindled from 56.3% to 35.4% between 2006 and 2010, while EU membership grew from 27.5% to 42.2% over the same period.

16. Minsk and Moscow maintain a multifaceted and dynamic relationship that has taken various twists and turns in recent years. The Russian Federation is Belarus’ main trading partner. It supplies 54.5% of all Belarus’ imports and receives 30.4% of its exports (primarily minerals, chemical products, machinery and food). Moreover, Russia is also the country’s main investor (approximately 82.5 % of the foreign investments in Belarus). Up until 2006, the Russian Federation provided its neighbour with sizable subsidies in the form of under-market prices for oil and gas and despite a recent rise, from \$46 to \$170 from 2006 to 2010, gas prices remain generally low and well below the market levels. Most recently, Belarus’ power supply was cut in half by the Russian power network operator over unpaid bills. Most recently, Belarus requested easing the conditions of a loan that it had requested of Russia's top lender Sberbank and Deutsche Bank. The initial conditions of the loans envisioned granting Moscow with export contracts and a 35 per cent stake in Belarus chief potash exporter Belaruskali.³

17. Military co-operation between the two countries remains strong. The latest Russian military doctrine of 2010 makes explicit mention of Belarus, emphasizing the security of the “Union State of Belarus and Russia”. According to the text of the doctrine, Russia “considers an armed attack on the state-participant in the Union State, as well as all other actions involving the use of military force against it, as an act of aggression against the Union State, and it will take measures in response”. The Russian Federation has a number of military bases on the territory of Belarus near Baranovici as well as a naval communication centre near Vileyka. In general though, the pace of integration between Belarus and Russia has been inconsistent.

18. Along with the Russian Federation, Belarus is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which was founded on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty (1992). The Russian Federation plays a prominent role in the organisation, which also includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russia’s national security strategy to 2020 underlines the role to be played by CSTO as “the main interstate instrument for responding to regional threats and challenges of a military-political or military-strategic nature”. The organisation has been marketed domestically as a counterpart to NATO. Following the 2008 war with Georgia, President Medvedev urged that CSTO be strengthened to be “no worse than NATO”.

19. In February 2009, five CSTO member states agreed to establish a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) to serve against military aggression, conduct anti-terrorist operations, fight transnational crime and drug trafficking, and to respond to natural disasters. CSTO did not take action during the ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and was unable to agree on the provision of military assistance, provoking President Lukashenko to question the future of the organisation. After its parliament ratified CRRF in May 2010, Belarus pledged to contribute more than 2,000 military personnel to the force, including conventional military units, counterterrorism officers and a contingent from the intelligence services. Holding this year’s Presidency of CSTO, Belarus has

³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/29/idUSL5E7JT0U320110829>

highlighted the need to address the organisation's peacekeeping efforts as well as the activities of CSTO Collective Rapid Response units. During the recent CSTO summit in Astana, chaired by Mr Lukashenko, a number of draft decisions were chartered, such as an agreement to strengthen the collective rapid response forces, to set up a special co-ordination body to analyze information networks and security, as well as to boost co-operation on drug trafficking from Afghanistan. CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha announced that the heads of state had "agreed to use collective rapid response forces for the sake of protecting the constitutional order in a particular CSTO member state."⁴

20. There has been considerable economic and political tension between Minsk and Moscow, including, among others, the fact that Belarus did not recognise the independence of South-Ossetia or Abkhazia after the 2008 Georgia War. Friction between the two countries also arose as Russia sought to obtain a controlling share of the Belarusian pipeline network Beltransgaz, amongst other vital distribution and processing assets. The dispute over the price of Russian gas deliveries to Belarus was resolved after Belarus ceded 50 per cent of the Beltransgaz shares to the Russian gas company Gazprom. Similarly, the Urals Potash Company has announced plans of taking over Belarus Potash. Other points of disagreement related to Belarus' initial refusal to sign on the CRRF agreement and the fact that it provided a safe haven to Kyrgyzstan's Kurmanbek Bakiyev. What is more, the harsh coverage of President Lukashenko in Russia throughout 2010, up until the elections in November that year, contributed to a souring in relations. In an interview with the French daily "Le Figaro", President Lukashenko accused Russia of financing opposition candidates Vladimir Nyaklyaeu and Andrei Sannikov. Recently, Moscow criticized the fact that numerous Russian citizens had been detained during the latest waves of protests in the country.

21. Bilateral relations between Minsk and Moscow have remained fitful in recent months. Nevertheless, the somewhat combative rhetoric seems to belie a number of recently-signed agreements between the two countries. In December 2010, a day before the presidential election, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement which removed duties on exports of crude oil to Belarus deal, equivalent to a \$4 billion subsidy. The export duty issue had been threatening to freeze a substantial part of the Belarus economy and removed the last obstacle to Belarus' accession into the free trade zone agreed by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, set to go in force in 2013. At the latest Customs Union Business Forum, Prime Minister Putin expressed hope for the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which "can and must start operating as early as 2013."⁵ In line with this, President Dmitry Medvedev recently signed a law reforming Russia's system of technical regulations, in order to expedite the integration processes in the Customs Union. That, and a host of other issues, such as the arming of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force and the construction of a nuclear power station in Belarus, were discussed during the latest meeting between the two countries' presidents in Sochi.

B. BELARUS-EU RELATIONS

22. Since president Lukashenko came to power, Belarus' relations with the EU have been uneasy. While he has repeatedly called for closer economic ties with the Union, he has rejected criticism of his regime as interference in the country's affairs. The EU restricted official contact with Minsk in the late 1990s and Belarus remains the only ex-Soviet country outside the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) framework. Due to this, Belarus has long been excluded from the EU's "European Neighbourhood" policy, which seeks to improve ties with countries neighbouring the EU. The Union barred high-ranking Belarusian officials involved in the disappearance and murder of four journalists and politicians from its territory, as well as those

⁴ <http://law.by/work/EnglPortal.nsf/0/2A0E9BA28F01E676C22578FC004D841A?OpenDocument>

⁵ <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/russia/detail/108483/#ixzz1TJYGF2Z3>

involved in subsequent cover-ups. In the December 2004 elections, the EU announced an extension of its visa ban to “persons who are directly responsible for the fraudulent elections and referendum in Belarus on October 17, 2004 and those who are responsible for severe human rights violations in the repression of peaceful demonstrators in the aftermath of the elections and referendum in Belarus”. After the equally fraudulent presidential elections of March 2006, the EU imposed a visa ban and an asset freeze upon 31 high-ranking Belarusian officials, including Mr Lukashenko, key members of the Belarusian presidential administration, parliament, law enforcement ministries, and election authorities.

23. In a move to boost the development of Belarusian civil society, Western governments have encouraged a more active engagement with Minsk in recent years. The EU therefore boosted relations with Belarus after the Russian-Belarus tension over energy prices in 2006 and 2007, in exchange for political and economic liberalisation. Following the release of three prominent political prisoners, the EU decided to temporarily lift the sanctions it had imposed on the Belarus leadership with the hope the regime would be willing to review its undemocratic practices. The suspension of sanctions was subsequently extended. In May 2009, the Union invited Belarus to join its Eastern Partnership Initiative, designed to facilitate co-operation with Eastern European and Caucasus nations. The EU is also considering facilitating visa regimes and travel procedures for Belarus citizens. In the long term, the initiative foresees the creation of a free trade zone and visa free travel to the EU.

24. Belarus’ attempted rapprochement with the West, although inconsistent and hesitant, generated tangible economic benefits. It significantly improved Minsk’s international standing and contributed to a certain degree of progress, albeit erratic, towards political liberalisation. Perhaps as a consequence of that, the 2010 pre-election campaign was considerably more open and democratic. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the EU, neither dialogue nor isolation has been particularly fruitful vis-à-vis the regime in generating political or economic reform. Civil society remains weak and Mr Lukashenko maintains a tight grip over the country.

25. Following the December 2010 crackdown, the EU imposed a travel ban on and froze the assets of President Lukashenko and 157 of his political associates, recently adding 19 names to the sanctions list. In June 2011, the EU also decided to take measures against three Belarusian companies, associated with President Lukashenko. Most recently, the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton released a statement denouncing the sentencing and use of capital punishment in connection with two recent criminal cases. This statement was a follow up to a previous release by Ms Ashton on the brutal handling of the “silent protesters,” many of whom “have been mistreated by law enforcement personnel and fined or sentenced to administrative arrest on questionable charges.”⁶ While the charges were dropped against Ryhor Kastusyow, deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and a candidate in last year’s presidential election, other pressing cases remain outstanding. The President of the European Parliament has been continuously calling for the release of opposition leader Dzmitry Bandarenka who is in need of medical treatment and has been forced to undergo surgery in the Minsk City Clinical Hospital. The authorities recently arrested a prominent human rights activist Ales Byalyatski on charges of tax evasion. Mr Lukashenko allegedly pledged to release all political prisoners by the end of September 2011, as conveyed by Bulgaria’s Foreign Minister in a letter to Catherine Ashton.⁷ Currently, the Belarus stance is under review at a meeting in Sopot (2-3 September) Gymnich of the 27 EU foreign ministers, led by Ms. Ashton, in Poland. The United States has also imposed sanctions against Belarus, which, in turn, announced the suspension of its nuclear programme to eliminate all its stocks of highly enriched uranium until the sanctions were lifted.

⁶ http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/press_corner/all_news/news/2011/18_07_2011_en.htm

⁷ http://naviny.by/rubrics/english/2011/09/03/ic_articles_259_174979/

C. BELARUS-NATO RELATIONS

26. NATO-Belarus relations are based on dialogue and the pursuit of common interests. Co-operation is focused on working-level engagement and capacity building. Belarus has developed an Individual Partnership Programme (IPP) and partakes in the Planning and Review Process (PARP), a defence reform framework tasked to train and prepare the Belarusian military for participation in international peacekeeping operations. Despite fluctuations (relations took a downward turn in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential election), dialogue between Belarus and NATO has been sustained. In 1995, Belarus joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme (PfP), which provided the context for successful co-operation - Belarus participates in approximately 100 NATO training activities per year, aiming to assist Belarus in reaching its PARP benchmarks. Belarus is also a contributor to the Northern Distribution Network that supplies the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Moreover, Belarus has offered to host the 2012 exercise of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre (EADRCC).

27. However, when compared to NATO's relations with other third countries, interaction with Belarus has rather been limited and Minsk's attitudes to NATO can be, at best, summarized as ambivalent. Belarus was strongly opposed to NATO's enlargement in Central Europe. Government officials, including President Lukashenko, have repeatedly highlighted the military threat that NATO represents. According to independent expert Dzianis Meliansou, who briefed the Political Committee during the 2010 Annual Session in Warsaw, recent polls show that only 22% of the population support closer co-operation with NATO, while a mere 10% of the population favours membership.

28. In recognition of Belarus' important geo-strategic location and the fact that it is a direct neighbour to NATO (Belarus borders three NATO states), the Alliance has kept the security dialogue open, preferring engagement and dialogue over isolation. Nevertheless, it has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the political and human rights situation in Belarus, an issue that has been often raised by NATO representatives during exchanges with Belarus officials. This highlights the need for any high-level engagement with Belarus to be reviewed by NATO on a case-by-case basis.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

29. Belarus remains a difficult partner for NATO, and the EU in particular. While Minsk continues its participation in PfP and a number of other NATO activities, relations with the EU have been in deadlock since the government's crackdown on protestors and opposition figures following the disputed presidential election on 19 December 2010 and the recent demonstrations. NATO and the EU remain concerned about the political and human rights situation in Belarus. The repression following the election stands in stark opposition to commitments made to the OSCE, the Council of Europe and NATO (in the PfP Framework Document). The international community has unanimously condemned the actions of the Lukashenko regime and EU and NATO member states have imposed travel restrictions upon and frozen the assets of President Lukashenko and senior Belarusian officials.

30. Unless the Belarusian government does a U-turn, putting a halt to repression and adopting a course that allows for political as well as economic reforms, there is little hope that relations between Minsk and the West can be restored to pre-December 2010 levels. Minsk has failed to respect human rights or uphold democratic standards in the past. President Lukashenko has engaged in limited co-operation with the West when it suited him and has increased repression when he deemed necessary. As far as the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's relations with the Parliament of Belarus are concerned, your Rapporteur does not believe the Assembly could re-engage unless the regime in Minsk changes its course. Indeed, it would be desirable to

establish useful contact with the members of the Belarus diaspora and to invite speakers from outside the governmental sphere to seminars organised by the NATO PA.

31. Yet, as a direct neighbour of NATO and the EU, Belarus has an important role to play in European security and stability. Therefore, NATO and the EU have an interest in continuing and, where possible, further developing a working relationship with Belarus. Belarus, on the other hand, is interested in maintaining its independence and sovereignty and has in the past used its relations with NATO and the EU as a lever in its bilateral relations with Russia. The deteriorating economic and financial situation of Belarus provided an incentive for the regime in Minsk to improve its relationship with the West, but the violent crackdown in December badly damaged the progress towards better relations.

32. While the current financial crisis gripping Belarus might provide an entry point for greater involvement by the West it appears that Belarus is drifting more and more into the realm of Russian influence. However, the economic and financial challenges that the country faces require urgent reforms of the economy. Thus far, the Minsk government has been unable to come up with a viable strategy to improve economic conditions. Moreover, the opposition itself is weak, divided and ineffective. Opposition parties lack functioning party structures. Critics, such as Rodger Potocki, suggest that the opposition is out of touch with the needs of the population; opposition candidates are often primarily concerned with their personnel advancement⁸. NATO member countries should therefore continue, and where possible, improve their assistance to build up civil society in Belarus. Assistance provided to institutions like the European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania can make an important contribution in this regard. As mentioned above, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly should continue to monitor the developments in Belarus closely and include independent experts on the country in its activities where appropriate.

33. NATO and the EU should keep the door open for dialogue. However, engaging Belarus has to be based on the principle of conditionality. NATO and the EU must make it clear that relations with Belarus can only improve if Minsk ends its repression of the opposition. At the very least, Belarusian authorities must release anyone detained for the expression of critical views regarding the outcome of the election and not imprison additional political opponents. The Allies should also demand a clear roadmap for democratic reform and free and fair elections to be developed by the Belarusian authorities, with the assistance of international institutions. The transatlantic partners must remain committed to supporting the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus. The EU has a leading role to play in this regard and the international donor's conference "Solidarity with Belarus" in Warsaw in February 2011 has been a good step in this direction.

34. Unfortunately, in the past, NATO and the EU considered their relations with Belarus primarily as an appendage to their relationships with Russia. It is time to recognize Belarus as a country of its own playing its part in the European political and security landscape and keep it on our agenda. Democratic countries, NATO and the EU in particular, must speak with one voice and strongly advocate democratic reform and respect for human rights in Belarus.

⁸ See "Enemies of Themselves" by Rodger Potocki, "Transition Online" 6 December 2010: <http://www.tol.org/client/article/22008-enemies-of-themselves.html>