

A MARSHALL PLAN FOR BELARUS

THE FUTURE RELATIONS BETWEEN A DEMOCRATIC BELARUS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

BY ANDRIUS KUBILIUS

Across eastern Europe, citizens are demanding democracy. Frightened by this change in people's moods, autocrats like Alyaksandr Lukashenka are taking increasingly violent measures to suppress protests and to threaten the European Union.

Now, plans have to be made for the future relations between a Democratic Belarus and the EU, writes Andrius Kubilius, MEP (EPP) and former PM of Lithuania. Among other things, he argues for a Marshall Plan for investment and ambitious reforms of the EU's Eastern Partnership policies.



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On the eastern side of the European continent, we can observe a common phenomenon that has become more and more pronounced lately: people are demanding democratic change while the autocratic regimes in Minsk and Moscow, frightened by this change in the people's moods, are taking ever more violent measures to persecute any manifestations of democratic sentiment.

In 2014, a democratic revolution took place in Ukraine. In 2020, the people of Belarus launched a similar democratic revolution there. The presidential elections that took place at that time showed that around 60 percent of Belarusians voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, while Alyaksandr Lukashenka was sup-

ported by only around 30 percent of voters.¹ Lukashenka temporarily suppressed the public protests with brutal measures, but the pro-democracy mood of the people has not gone away.

Similar processes have started in Russia. Despite the fact that the Kremlin effectively prevented the opposition from running in the 2021 Duma elections by poisoning its leaders, putting them in prison and not registering them as candidates, convincing analyses of the actual election results indicate that the Kremlin-backed United Russia party won only 31 percent of the vote (and not 50 percent as the Kremlin claims).² In other words, almost 70 percent of the voters who took part in the elections did not vote for “Putin’s party”. Thus, it turns out that the actual support for Vladimir Putin in Russia in 2021 is very similar to Lukashenka’s level of support in Belarus in 2020.

These and other facts clearly tell us that democracy is slowly but surely spreading to the eastern side of the European continent. The autocrats are resisting this spread by helping each other to survive. However, a democratic transformation in Europe’s east is inevitable, sooner or later.

The European Union must have a strategy to support the development of democracy

This transformation in countries such as Belarus and Russia will be implemented by the citizens themselves, but the EU must have a clear strategy not only to help the citizens of these countries regain their right to free and transparent

1 [Analysis of the Results of 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus on the basis of official protocols of Electoral committee and data from the Golos platform](#) (Исследование о результатах выборов Президента Республики Беларусь 2020 года на основе официальных протоколов УИК и данных платформы Голос).

2 See: Sergey Shpilkin, [Facebook post](#) from 21 September 2021; also: [Researcher Says Raw Voting Data Points To Massive Fraud In United Russia’s Duma Victory](#), RFE/RL’s Russian Service, 22 September 2021.

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elections, but also regarding what kind of relationship the EU will seek with a Democratic Belarus and a Democratic Russia after the transformations in these countries have taken place.

In its recently adopted recommendations to the EU institutions on the direction of EU-Russia political relations³, the European Parliament has unambiguously recommended that the EU pursues a strategic approach in its relations with Russia, which facilitates the return of the Russian people to a democratic governance system. To this end, the European Parliament has called on the EU institutions to develop and make publicly available a strategy for their future relations with a democratic Russia. The consultations and discussions with the public on such a strategy can assist this democratic transition to take place.

The EU must do the same when charting the prospects for its relations with a Democratic Belarus. Supporting the democratic transition in Belarus must now be the EU’s top geopolitical priority, not only because it is a way of protecting the EU from new provocations by the dictator Lukashenko, but because a successful transition in Belarus would also be a source of inspiration for the Russian public.

The reason Putin is supporting Lukashenka’s criminal regime is that it is a part of Putin’s strategy to maintain his power in the Kremlin. By preventing an upheaval in Belarus, it cannot become an example for the Russian people to draw inspiration from. Therefore, the EU must have its own strategy to prevent Putin from prevailing in Belarus

3 [European Parliament recommendation of 16 September 2021 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the direction of EU-Russia political relations \(2021/2042\(INI\)\)](#), European Parliament.

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and to help the Belarusian people regain what Lukashenka has blatantly stolen, namely the right to free and democratic elections.

Why should the EU care? Because this is the only way that it can export stability to its neighbourhood rather than import instability from the same region. We have all seen what kind of hybrid instability Lukashenka can wreak havoc on the EU's borders if the West does not stop him in time. But Lukashenka can only be stopped if the EU has a long-term strategy to help Belarus become a democratic and stable country.

The geopolitical orientation of a Democratic Belarus and stabilising a young democracy

During the Belarusian revolution in 2020, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her staff proclaimed a clever revolutionary slogan: what is happening in Belarus is a democratic revolution, not a geopolitical revolution. Moreover, Belarus's geopolitical choices will be made after its citizens have regained and exercised their right to free elections, which were stolen from them by the usurper Lukashenka. The revolution leaders' attitude was perfectly understandable, given the hopes that were being pinned at the time on Putin to act more wisely towards Lukashenka and the ordinary Belarusians who were protesting against his regime, as well as Belarusians' own sensitivities towards relations with Russia.

But the slogan that suited Belarusian revolution leaders to assert the future geopolitical orientations of a Democratic Belarus in 2020 is already inadequate today. It is inadequate not only for the revolution leaders themselves, but also for ordinary Belarusians. Clearer geopolitical orientations are needed, both for the Belarusian democratic revolution leaders and for the EU.

First of all, it is clear that there has been a change in Belarusian opinion over the past year. Putin's support for the toxic Lukashenka regime and its crimes is reducing Belarusians' favour towards Russia. Meanwhile, the number of supporters in favour of a European orientation is increasing. More importantly, the EU can already do much more to ensure that Belarus chooses a pro-European direction after the democratic revolution.

Secondly, it must also be remembered that Belarus's transition to democracy – like that of any other country ruled by authoritarians – will involve two important elements and two different stages. The first stage comprises a democratic revolutionary change of power, when democracy takes over from the usurper. How this might happen is beyond the scope of this text. As the exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky claims about a regime change in Russia, such a change might be an unexpected (and thus impossible to predict) black swan event.⁴ However, perhaps even more crucially, this will be followed by the all-important stabilisation of the young democracy.

As we can see from the last 30 years of world history, the leaders of democratic revolutions often concentrate only on the first stage – the revolutionary change of power – and neglect to prepare adequately and in time for the second stage, i.e. the stabilisation of democracy. As a result of this mistake, many young democracies fail to stabilise, and therefore hand power back to populists who quickly return to authoritarian traditions.

Thus, post-revolutionary stabilisation is just as important as the revolutionary transition of power itself. The democracies of Central Europe and the Baltic states were stabilised in the region after the 1990 revolution through EU integration. There are no other examples of successful democratic stabilisation since 1990: no post-Soviet, post-totalitarian country in the EU's neighbourhood has

⁴ Reznik I., Chilcote R., Meyer H., [Khodorkovsky Channels Lenin to Plot Next Russian Revolution](#), Bloomberg, 12 December 2014.

managed to become a stable and successful democracy on its own without integration towards the EU. In this post-totalitarian space, the only choices for young democracies are either integration into the EU or rejecting such an integration, followed by the slow erosion of democracy and increasingly pronounced authoritarian tendencies that eventually turn the country into a criminal dictatorship.

In Belarus, the transition to democracy will certainly happen. It will happen faster if the people are not afraid of the future and are aware of what awaits them after the revolution, including relations with the EU. In order to help a Democratic Belarus stabilise after the change of government, it is important for the EU to discuss this potential relationship in as much detail as possible with the leaders who are striving for a democratic regime change in Belarus.

Both the future leaders of a Democratic Belarus and the EU need to be clear that the task of stabilising a young democracy will not be an easy one. The current administration in the Kremlin should not be expected to care about the stability of a young Belarusian democracy (although it would at least be helpful to see less Kremlin interference). Moreover, only a long-term strategy of integration of a Democratic Belarus with the EU can help to stabilise Belarusian democracy, guarantee the long-term growth of the Belarusian population's economy and social welfare as well as reinforce the country's sovereignty and security.

A "Marshall Plan" for Belarus

It is therefore to be welcomed that the EU heeded the calls (including from the author of this text) immediately after the revolutionary events in Belarus last year⁵, and that the Commission has proposed a large-scale (up to 3 billion euro) "Marshall Plan" of financial and investment support for a Democratic Belarus, to be implemented immediately

⁵ Kubilius A., [Time is running out for Lukashenko](#), Euractiv.com, 4 September 2020.

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after the democratic transition of power.⁶ Such a plan is an important initiative, but its potential is not exploited today. There are no substantive and detailed discussions with the leaders of the Belarusian democratic movement and their experts about how to implement such a plan. Therefore, ordinary Belarusians know very little about the EU's plans to help Belarus after the democratic transition.

It is thus imperative that the representatives of the EU, together with Belarusian experts on democratic change, start without delay an intensive and public debate on the details and concrete plans for the implementation of this Marshall Plan. This will not only help Belarusians better understand the opportunities opened up by the plan but will also help them get used to the idea that the European direction is a worthwhile choice for them after the democratic transition, and that the EU is concerned with how to protect them from dictatorship.

Hence, following a democratic transition of power in Belarus, the EU must be ready to implement a Marshall Plan for a Democratic Belarus immediately. It is worth emphasising once again that the preparations to implement plan must be made before the democratic transition. This could have a major impact on the mood of the Belarusian people today, on the democratic transition itself and on the geopolitical direction Belarus will be inclined to take after the transition.

The EU Marshall Plan for modernising Belarus after Lukashenka could have two major components: one of them

⁶ [The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus](#), European Commission, 28 May 2021.

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related to a reform agenda for Belarus, and the other one related to an investment agenda.

After the democratic change in Belarus, funding can be used from the initial offer of a Marshall Plan made by the EU. However, once the development finance architecture is in place, a need will arise to convene a donor conference for a Democratic Belarus. This conference could launch an active phase of investment support to modernise the country. The actual needs for modernisation of Belarus could stand at around 10 to 15 billion euros for the next five years, to which we should also add the costs of external debt.

The implementation of the EU Marshall Plan for a Democratic Belarus will require serious preparatory work on both sides, i.e. the EU and the democratic forces of Belarus. The EU has to develop an institutional architecture and a mechanism to pursue political dialogue with Belarusian democrats immediately, and seek an agreement on a joint vision and investment support plan. This mechanism can work as an interim international agreement between the EU and the leaders of democratic forces in Belarus.

The EU can achieve such a goal by organising annual summits with the democratic forces of Belarus, followed by the adoption of joint policy guidelines. For example, at the first summit, the EU and a delegation representing the Belarusian democracy movement could agree on the following policy guidelines:

1. The future of EU relations with a democratic Belarus after the fall of the Lukashenka regime.
2. An interim architecture for the EU's political dialogue with the representatives of a democratic Belarus.

3. An implementation architecture for the comprehensive EU multi-billion euro plan, both interim and after the fall of the regime.
4. The establishment of an EU-led group to work on international justice for the people of Belarus (i.e. a tribunal for the Lukashenka regime).

In such a way, the EU can contribute to mobilising democratic forces in Belarus and prepare them for their strategic responsibilities in a Democratic Belarus.

Stabilising democracy in Belarus is a prospect for its European integration

Alongside the implementation of the Marshall Plan, the EU must offer the leaders of a Democratic Belarus the chance to start implementing measures to assist the stabilisation of democracy in the country. Specifically, these are the same measures that the EU is implementing in the whole Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. The EaP countries and Belarus face the same challenge: how to stabilise young democracies in a post-totalitarian society. Here, frustration with the natural ‘inability’ of young democracies to create miracles that many have been waiting and hoping for – but have not received – can quickly set in. Therefore, nostalgia for the totalitarian Soviet past or for one's own national authoritarian past rapidly acquires the power to destroy young democracies from within. This has been the case in many of the EaP countries, and it will be the same for the young democracy of Belarus. Moreover, the Kremlin's ability and capacity – with all its hybrid disinformation power – will likely sow a mood of distrust and disillusionment with democracy in Belarus.

As already mentioned, the Baltic and Central European countries faced similar challenges in the 1990s. They were strategically assisted to stabilise themselves by the fact that the EU offered these countries a clear prospect of membership very early on – already in 1993, after the first signs of political instability in these young democracies appear-

red at the end of 1992. However, it is worth remembering that the EU had more geopolitical resolve then, and that Yeltsin's Russia was different from Putin's Russia today.

Despite all the changes that have taken place in recent decades, both in the EU and in Russia, the EU must immediately offer to a post-transition Democratic Belarus the same instruments that it is using to assist Eastern Partnership countries. This will encourage reforms that are necessary to achieve success (economic success in particular), and thus lay the foundation for the consolidation of democracy. It is worth remembering that the EU is implementing the following instruments for the more advanced EaP countries, the so-called Trio countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova): a Visa Waiver Agreement, an Association Agreement and a Free Trade Agreement. The European Parliament has also proposed a new and important instrument for the Eastern Partnership, namely a rapid integration of the EaP countries (especially the Trio countries) into the European Union's Single Market and its "Four Freedoms".⁷

The need to reform the Eastern Partnership policy

A history of both successes and failures of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy shows us that in order for the EU to effectively assist a future Democratic Belarus, the EU itself needs to make significant changes to the current Eastern Partnership policy. For we can state with great confidence that, in relation to the Eastern Partnership countries (especially the Trio countries), this policy is in a state of profound stagnation or impasse.⁸

⁷ [European Parliament recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the June 2020 Summit \(2019/2209\(INI\)\)](#), European Parliament.

⁸ Kubilius A., Stanionis R., [Eastern Partnership 'Beyond Westlessness': A New Momentum For The European Integration](#), September 2021.

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It is essential that the EU offers the EaP countries a much more ambitious integration agenda for the next decade, not only for a future Democratic Belarus but also for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. The European Parliament has proposed that this should be an agenda for integration into an intermediate status that is more easily achievable and acceptable to both the EU institutions and the EaP countries. This status can be defined as integration into the Single Market or the European Economic Area and is further elaborated in other texts.⁹

A Democratic Belarus has potential to move quickly along this path of integration into the Single Market, not too far behind the Trio countries, because the Belarusian bureaucracy is sufficiently educated and efficient. Furthermore, Belarus has thus far avoided significant "oligarchic corruption", which is one of the main obstacles to accelerated integration into the EU Single Market in some of the Trio countries.

Integration under the "everything, but institutions" formula

Integration into the European Union's Single Market or the European Economic Area requires that a country has implemented around 70 percent of the *acquis communautaire* and has a stable democracy and rule of law. However, integration into the EU's Single Market offers the country's population virtually all the benefits of genuine membership. It is not for nothing that Romano Prodi, the former President of the European Commission, has defined this path of integration into the EU Single Market in the simple formula "everything, but institutions". That is, a country that joins the EU's Single Market re-

⁹ Kubilius A., Stanionis R., supra 7; Kubilius A., [The Future of Eastern Partnership Policy](#), November 2021.

ceives virtually all the benefits – especially the economic and financial benefits – that full membership of the EU brings, but without the possibility to take part in the EU's decision-making through the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. Nevertheless, countries such as Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein enjoy such a status.

For example, it is worth remembering that Lithuania's integration into the EU's Single Market has helped it achieve a stunning level of economic development over the past 20 years. While in 1999, Lithuania's GDP per capita (measured using purchasing power parity) was only 36 percent of the EU average, it is now over 87 percent of the average after two decades of being fully integrated into the Single Market. This example is worth following for a Democratic Belarus, which according to the IMF now has a GDP per capita that equals only 44 percent of the EU average.¹⁰

It is also worth noting that such an intermediate status of integration into the Single Market or the European Economic Area does not restrict a country's opportunity to seek full membership of the EU at a later stage. For instance, this was the path followed by the Nordic countries and Austria in the early 1990s. These countries initially achieved integration into the European Economic Area (the EU's Single Market) and later decided to seek full membership of the EU. The citizens of Norway and Iceland decided against EU membership in referendums, thus leaving Sweden, Finland and Austria to become full EU members.

Consolidation of political will in the EU

Such a reform, with a clearly achievable and economically beneficial objective, will help move the Eastern Partnership policy out of the stagnation it has been in for the last few years. This would be particularly important for a

¹⁰ According to: [World Economic Outlook database: April 2021](#). International Monetary Fund.

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Democratic Belarus when choosing the direction of its future geopolitical integration with Europe.

In order to achieve these kinds of changes, which would be important for all the Eastern Partnership countries, it is essential to realise within the EU that continued impasse of the Eastern Partnership policy is dangerous. EaP countries are increasingly losing faith in their prospects for further integration, and the erosion of this faith is followed by an erosion of their motivation for reform. Moreover, this impasse is also dangerous for the EU itself, as it opens the door to the Kremlin or Beijing to influence the geopolitical choices of the EaP countries. The natural risk is that this will only lead to more geopolitical instability in the EU's neighbourhood.

Therefore, it is crucial to find ways within the EU to consolidate the political will to make the Eastern Partnership policy much more ambitious. To this end, the EU ought to recall its own experience from 2014, when the so-called Berlin Process was initiated to boost the integration process in the Western Balkans. To this end, a coalition of like-minded EU member states was set up to support a more ambitious integration with the Western Balkans. Thus, the Berlin Process coalition was born, and its example is worth following.

Such a coalition of the willing could include those countries which, for various reasons, support a more ambitious Eastern Partnership policy and will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the next decade. Notably, these countries include France and the Czech Republic (2022), Sweden (2023), Poland (2025), Lithuania and Latvia (2027 and 2028 respectively). This coalition could also include Germany, as well as other Central, Bal-

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tic and Northern European countries. The members of the coalition should agree in advance on EaP policy objectives to be achieved during each of their presidencies. This could be the birth of a new Paris, Prague or Stockholm process, depending on which capital will take the initiative. Such an initiative is critical not only for the overall success of the EaP, but also for helping a future Democratic Belarus to stabilise its democracy by taking advantage of the EU's integration process.

How to restore the rule of law?

It is absolutely clear that one of the most important and most difficult tasks for a Democratic Belarus's integration into the EU will be implementing the rule of law. Such an implementation will require not only a new constitution and other legal norms essential for a democratic state, but also a large number of professionals who are new to Belarus's governing bureaucracy or who have not been tainted by the crimes of the regime.

This requires two things today: a) firstly, the EU must launch mass training programmes for new professionals for a Democratic Belarus (especially in the areas of rule of law and the EU's *acquis communautaire*). One of the most effective ways to do this is to make full use of the European Humanities University, a Belarusian university that has relocated to Vilnius to escape persecution by the Lukashenko regime and which is strongly supported by the EU. Secondly, the EU must help a Democratic Belarus prepare a special strategy, based on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹¹, to help distinguish between those current government officials and civil servants who are tainted by the crimes of the Lukashenko regime and those who have not taken part in them. The latter group,

¹¹ [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

together with those who have fled Belarus from the regime's persecution or political prisoners, must take responsibility for governing and managing a new Democratic Belarus. The EU must quickly enable them to complete professional retraining courses, thereby acquiring the necessary knowledge to understand how the EU works.

EU expert support to reforms in Democratic Belarus

A Democratic Belarus will need special support from the EU, especially in the initial post-transition period. It is already worthwhile for the EU to start preparing for this institutionally. The EU has experience providing concentrated and effective support to the Eastern Partnership countries. A good example for a Democratic Belarus, and for the EU itself, could be the support mechanisms that the EU provided to Ukraine in the immediate aftermath of the Maidan revolution in 2014, namely the establishment of a dedicated Support Group for Ukrainian Reforms (SGUA) within the European Commission itself. This support group has been, and continues to be, a particularly effective instrument to aid Ukraine's reforms. The European Commission must be ready to set up a similar Support Group for democratic reforms in Belarus.

A successful Democratic Belarus is also a way to support a Democratic Russia

The rapprochement and integration of a Democratic Belarus with the European Union is not anti-Russian. On the contrary, the success of Belarus's transformation can have a profound impact on Russia's changes. These changes are also inevitable, and the EU needs to support them with very clear practical objectives, in particular geopolitical security objectives. The EU, whose security is most threatened by the authoritarian and aggressive policies of the current Kremlin, must remember that democracies do not wage war on one another. The EU, especially those of its member states that are obliged to defend the EU's eastern

border, needs good relations with both Russia and Belarus, but this is only possible if both countries transform themselves into democracies. This is a goal worth pursuing for the EU as a whole. Therefore, the EU institutions need to put into practice a clear strategy for how a Democratic Belarus will be supported and stabilised, as well as step up the pressure on both Lukashenka and Putin to give

Belarusians the opportunity to freely and democratically elect their new leaders. That is what is needed today, in addition to the EU's current support of Belarusian civil society. And the implementation of such a strategy requires a much stronger and more effective leadership role from the EU than it has demonstrated so far in dealing with the inexcusably protracted political crisis in Belarus.

This brief is part of the series "How to Build a Democracy", which aims to create understanding about reforms within the context of the Belarusian democratization process.

The first report in this series, "How to Break Lukashenka" by Anders Åslund, can be found [here](#).

The second report, "The Belarusian Diaspora – and Its Role in Solving the Political Crisis" by Alesia Rudnik, can be found [here](#).