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A flower left to wilt

If the rest of Europe truly wants to support democratic movements in Belarus, it needs to stop seeing the country and its people as a problem

In spite of the political crisis, three years of repression and war at the borders, Belarus today is a country where many continue to hope for a future in which human rights are respected and everyone can freely express their views.

Belarusians had their revolution in 2020 — it took place in their hearts and minds. The people are now on a difficult path towards changes that could stabilise the situation and lead to a life without violence and new upheavals. The trials and hardships the people have endured will not have been in vain. And on this path, the country deserves not pity but full support.

The people want peaceful changes that will allow the release of political prisoners and create conditions for dialogue between the society and authorities, to end the country's global isolation. Today, there are about 1 400 political prisoners in the country. Their release is not only an act of justice, but also an important step to start the process of national reconciliation. There is a demand in society for concrete action, for the creation of conditions for civil dialogue that would make it possible to stabilise the situation.

The importance of recognition

The exclusion and the sanctions that are imposed against the Lukashenko's regime often hit ordinary people, not the authorities. It is important for Europe to see Belarus not just as a problem, but as an independent state that needs support. And in its policy, it should look forward, not backward, proceeding from its values and goals. And the goal is an independent, democratic state in the centre of Europe and a reliable partner in regional security issues.

It is necessary to achieve such a great goal with small steps. Along this

way, many Belarusians perceive Europe as a partner and hope that it will help to keep connections with the outside world and create conditions for the normalisation of the situation. It is important for the population to hear and see that Belarus is recognised as a state and that the aspirations of the society to democracy, respect for human dignity and freedom are supported. Belarusians are tired of their country being perceived as a 'buffer' between Russia and the West. For the majority of the country, it is extremely offensive to see Belarus as a 'satellite' of Russia and even more so, as an occupied territory. This does absolutely not correspond to reality.

Diplomatic presence is a tool that can support local civil society organisations and create conditions for the gradual restoration of trust and political dialogue.

The people do not want to be a bargaining chip in geopolitical games, but strive for Belarus to be perceived as an independent and respected state. This means that European support should be aimed at strengthening independence and creating conditions for the normal development of civil society. We are talking about practical steps: programmes for students and young professionals; educational exchanges and projects aimed at developing local initiatives; concrete actions to support political prisoners and their release; an increase of the European presence in Belarus.

Belarus needs partners who perceive it as a promising ally, not a problem. It is important to see concrete steps that lead to the release of political prisoners, an end to repression and the creation of conditions for political unfreezing. Let these steps be small to begin with, but it is crucial that the processes turn from isolation and confrontation to societal support, for the future of the country and the security of the region.

In this context, it is important for Belarusians in Belarus that diplomatic missions return to Minsk. This is not about the recognition of Aleksandr Lukashenko, but about the recognition of the right of Belarusians to their state and the fact that Belarusians are a part of the European region, which is wider than the borders of the European Union. Diplomatic presence is a tool that can support local civil society organisations and create conditions for the gradual restoration of trust and political dialogue.

Reversing an undesirable outcome

The isolation, also caused by sanctions, encourages the orientation of Belarusians towards the East and the reduction of ties with Europe.

People often do not understand why the sanctions policy of the West, seemingly aimed at putting pressure on the regime, first of all has a counterproductive effect on ordinary people. Travel restrictions, financial sanctions and international isolation are hitting those sections of society that seek change and want to remain connected to Europe. This leads to the strengthening of an anti-European discourse on the part of the authorities and attempts to make the West the enemy of the Belarusian people. At the same time, Belarusians do not want to completely distance themselves from Europe — they are looking for a balance that will allow them to remain a part of the European space and not become participants in the Russia's war against Ukraine.

For many Belarusians, European identity is not only a geopolitical choice, but also a symbol of ordinary life, where human rights are respected and there are opportunities for self-development. This identity was strengthened in 2020 and it is very important to support it. Even under external and internal pressure, Belarusian society preserves its cultural ties with Europe and strives for dialogue.

Belarusian civil society today is divided into two groups: those who stayed in the country despite the risks and those who were forced to leave after the events of 2020. Both groups are actively involved in the formation of their national identity. Today, the demand for safe participation in the country's civic life is extremely high, very many people have concentrated on charitable and local activities.

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At present, Belarusians need to restore a sense of community and unity. It is necessary to retain ties with those who have left and to build up horizontal ties within the country. Many initiatives, ranging from cultural projects to public programmes, are aimed at maintaining Belarusian identity and creating the feeling that it is possible to preserve one's identity and pride even under pressure. This includes not only the preservation of national symbols, but also the development of language, literature and other elements of national culture.

Support from outside should not appear like interference, but as assistance in maintaining ties with Europe and integrating it into the cultural and economic space. The more such links can be created, the stronger the democratic aspirations inside the country will be and the more difficult it will be for the authorities to isolate Belarus from the outside world.

Under the conditions of a permanent state of emergency, pressure and fear, it is almost impossible to take any step closer to democratic changes. In spite of all this, Belarusians are not giving up. Instead, they try to retain their principles and values: peacefulness, diligence, dignity and faith in the future of their country. And this deserves respect and support — both from the European Union and the whole West.



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