

Solidarity with Belarus

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Keynote Speech by HE Mr. Radosław Sikorski
Foreign Minister of Poland

Ministers, Mr. Commissioner, Dear Guests:

Welcome to the “Solidarity with Belarus” International Donors’ Conference. I also send special greetings to our Belarusian brothers and sisters, who are in our thoughts. This conference has been billed as a meeting to discuss Solidarity with Belarus. But it is more than that. It is also a conference to discuss our European, American, and global identity and our notion of Solidarity. Because the way we look at Belarus says something about the way we look at ourselves.

Over twenty years ago we voted in the first free and fair presidential elections in Poland since the Second World War. Six candidates ran for our country’s highest office. It took two rounds of voting to ensure the victory of a living legend of the Solidarity movement—Mr. Lech Wałęsa. Those elections were crucial for us not only politically, but also morally. They represented a nation-wide break with an oppressive past in favor of a dignified democratic future. That break cleared the way for the end of the Cold War and change for the better for most of communist Europe. Our memory of those events is still vivid, and it is that memory that made watching the December presidential elections play out in Belarus all the more extraordinary and all the more depressing.

Let’s be honest. For much of Europe and for most of the world, Belarus is largely an unknown. For most of modern history, leaders, thinkers, scientists, artists, and writers from this part of Europe have been unable to express their independent identity. And the rest of Europe has largely forgotten the history of Belarus, if it ever knew it. Yet something extraordinary has happened over the last two decades. Belarus has taken its place on the international stage, a fully recognized state, in principle free to shape its own destiny.

But Europe found it difficult to focus on this new family member that used Soviet iconography and rhetoric so liberally. This tended to be a source of mild amusement: “*Look, Belarus still has the KGB—what a quaint example of post-modern irony!*”

The irony was clear. Unfortunately, it was much clearer than the actual activities of the Belarusian KGB, which imprisoned and beat activists, shut down pro-democracy organizations, and harassed the Polish minority. Almost everyone in the audience here today knows someone who has suffered under this repression.

Europe’s detached, patronizing attitude has continued for too long. Far too long. While attitude is one thing, however, facts are another. Especially hard geographical facts. Minsk is closer to Warsaw, Vilnius, and Budapest than it is to Brussels. Minsk is closer to Berlin than it is to Rome. Minsk is closer to Brussels than it is to Lisbon or Helsinki. No one could reasonably

deny that Minsk is in Europe. Belarus is part of Europe, not only geographically, but mentally and culturally. It belongs to our European family of nations. And if Europe does not understand that basic fact, it is Europe that has an identity problem, not Belarus.

However, belonging to a family entails responsibilities as well as privileges. Meanwhile, President Lukashenka has shown himself unwilling to accept a single responsibility associated with belonging to the European family. And the rest of Europe has had to watch with growing dismay, now indignation, as basic human rights, basic civil liberties, and basic human decency have been sidelined and ignored. Don't we have any room for maneuver?

Perhaps until fairly recently it suited the European Union to treat Belarus like a faraway country about which it was best to know as little as possible. That all changed, however, in 2004 when the EU welcomed 10 new member states, including three countries that share Belarus' borders: Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Since then, the EU's interest and engagement in Belarusian issues has had to increase.

This is why this time round the European Union decided to take active steps to help Belarus move forward. Take my visit to Belarus last year with Mr. Guido Westerwelle, my German counterpart, for example. The people of Belarus and Poland suffered similar calamitous damage at the hands of the Nazi regime during World War II. What could be more symbolic than Germany and Poland coming to Belarus together to represent the European Union and offer President Lukashenka and the Belarusian people a new deal?

Our offer to Belarus was modest and reasonable. We were willing to accept an election process which met minimum standards, and to build on that outcome, whatever it was. We offered Belarus a generous financial helping hand as part of the deal. The European message got through to the Belarusian people. It became clear to them that they had been given a chance: their country could at last consolidate its hard-won independence by joining the wider European integration process. Tragically for Belarus, President Lukashenka has shown himself unwilling to refrain from using repression against his compatriots.

According to the renowned Belarusian journalist Andrey Dynko, Lukashenka's real intention in the recent elections was to hike levels of fear back up: the British historian and journalist Timothy Garton Ash quotes Andrey Dynko as saying that "*National fear must be kept higher than national debt.*" And so began a new round of crude repressions against the opposition: More beatings, more arrests, more manipulation—more Mr. Lukashenka.

The Lukashenka phenomenon is in fact simply the latest example of the foreign policy challenges posed by authoritarian states. How best to respond to a leadership that puts its own interests above those of its country and its people? Other examples of such behavior include Cuba, Zimbabwe, North Korea, Burma. Closer to home, we were shown just how much damage can be done by an authoritarian ruler by Slobodan Milosevic, and how difficult it is to mobilize a successful policy against such a man by the ensuing war.

This is the paradox. On the one hand, a policy based on sanctions and isolation suits such a leadership just fine—these people draw strength precisely from being separated from the international mainstream. On the other hand, a policy of engagement and principled partnership

may serve to encourage the existing government and provide further hindrance to pro-democratic forces.

So how should the European Union proceed in its dealings with Belarus? I stand before you today with three answers to this question.

My first message is to President Lukashenka and his circle. *You are losing.* If you did not realize that in December, it should be blindingly obvious to you today, following the events in Tunisia and Egypt. Your methods have no place in modern Europe. Sooner or later you too will be running away from your own people, hoping to find a country with even lower democratic standards than your own that is willing to take you in. You may want to consider keeping a jet ready to leave Minsk at the drop of a hat. But it needn't be this way. Despite this latest setback, Europe stands ready to engage with those of you who realize that this is no way to continue—that Belarus deserves to be led by reasonable people.

My second message is to the people of Belarus. *Europe is with you, and you are with Europe.* We are not going to stop supporting you merely because President Lukashenka finds it personally inconvenient or threatening to certain powerful economic interests. The European Union's practical commitment to Belarus will rise: more opportunities will emerge for you to travel to the European Union, to join European programs, to enjoy the benefits of modern European life. Our communication will be more intense thanks to new technologies and new platforms for interpersonal contact.

Poland has already decided to engage even more deeply in the development of Belarusian civil society in a number of areas. The recently announced lifting of visa fees for Belarusian citizens will strengthen ties between our societies and thus bring ordinary Belarusians closer to democracy and European values. This January alone our General Consulate in Brest issued almost 3000 visas—over 2000 more than twelve months ago. We hope other countries will follow Poland's example. We are opting to continue talks on visa liberalization between the EU and Minsk, and counting on the swift implementation of the Local Border Traffic Agreement with Belarus.

Poland's assistance to Belarus also has a financial aspect. Last year, we provided support for the victims of repression and their families. We also helped develop independent media centers, such as Belsat TV, Radio Racja and European Radio for Belarus, along with a host of educational and cultural initiatives for the promotion of Belarusian culture. Moreover, Poland has decided to double its financial assistance to Belarusian society, and has earmarked PLN 40 million for the cause in 2011.

Polish academia is also engaged in helping Belarus. As many as 250 Belarusian young people have taken part in the Konstanty Kalinowski scholarship program to study in Poland. Over 100 Polish universities have declared themselves ready to admit any Belarusian students expelled from academic institutions in their home country. We hereby call upon the EU and its member states to offer scholarship programs to Belarusian students.

We are going to cooperate with other institutions and social organizations in our efforts. We are also open to collaboration with other centers and donors. Poland's activities will be coordinated through the Foundation for International Solidarity/Polish Democratic Fund.

My third message is to you, the people sitting in this room and the governments and organizations that you represent. *Our Belarusian policy is working—we need to stick with it.* The opposition is more vigorous than ever. Lukashenka did not win the elections!

Yes, economically times are tough for us all. But it is when the going gets rough that it becomes all the more important that we display our generosity, especially towards those Europeans who need it most.

Yes, the European Union faces many pressing and complicated internal decisions over the future of the Eurozone. But when short-term pressures are intense, it is all the more important for us to keep an eye on deeper trends and the bigger picture, especially if this could lead to the realization of the idea of a common European home.

Yes, Europe is struggling to cope with so-called “enlargement fatigue” and the sheer complexity of the great European integration project. But marathons are designed to test one’s stamina, and tiredness needn’t mean failure. Tiredness can be overcome. The wall can be pushed through.

In order to provide effective assistance to Belarusian civil society we suggest increasing the funding offered to Belarusian NGOs by:

- a) increasing funds within the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Framework;
- b) creating a Civil Society Facility within the framework of the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument. This could be similar to the NGO support program implemented in the Western Balkans;
- c) ensuring the greater involvement of Belarusian NGOs in the activities of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

We support the idea of multilateral cooperation with Belarus within the framework of the Eastern Partnership—however, we suggest a reduction of Belarusian participation in initiatives that could strengthen the regime’s institutions (such as cooperation between police forces). In supporting Belarus, we focus on the diversity of projects and the diversity of the recipients of aid. We want to show that only pluralism and a diversity of views can bring freedom, democracy, and well-being.

Two days ago, I presented my idea of creating an ‘European endowment for democracy’ to the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union. This foundation would help develop democratic processes in the whole EU neighborhood—in Belarus, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Russia.

During the same meeting of EU Foreign Ministers, a set of restrictive measures against the representatives of the Belarusian authorities was agreed upon. These measures are much more severe than anything implemented so far, and the harshest we could decide by consensus. The

whole EU is continuing the policy of conditionality. If the regime becomes more liberal, we will broaden the range of our cooperation, if it engages in repression, we will impose restrictions. Naturally, that means that sanctions can be lifted as soon as the Belarusian authorities start respecting the rights of their citizens. I would like to see this happen as soon as possible.

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Poland remembers all too well the painful fight for the right to vote in free elections. No more so than in Gdańsk, where shipyard workers helped change the course of world history by demanding basic trade union rights. The sacrifice of our fight for freedom is commemorated by the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970, which salutes the victims of the massacre of defenseless civilians by the communist regime. The monument features an inscription of words taken from the poem, “You Who Wronged” by Czesław Miłosz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and a brilliant analyst of the mechanisms of totalitarian oppression. This is the fragment of the poem:

*You who wronged a simple man
Bursting into laughter at the crime,
And kept a pack of fools around you
To mix good and evil, to blur the line...*

*Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You can kill one, but another is born.
The words are written down, the deed, the date.*

These words could have been written in honor of Uladzimer Nyaklyaeu, writer, activist, and candidate in the presidential elections in Belarus, who was attacked and beaten on election night. The day will come when the people of Belarus will put up their own monument to commemorate these days of oppression and those who bravely took a stand. And it will be the turn of a Belarusian poet to find eloquent words to put on the monument. It remains for us to hope that day come as soon as possible for the Belarusian people. Europe and Poland are with you!