

VÁCLAV HAVEL ON BELARUS

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Eight countries of the former communist bloc are about to become new members of the European Union. Something that hardly anyone could have imagined until recently will thus become reality. Countries ruled just fifteen years ago by totalitarian regimes suppressing basic human rights and freedoms; countries, whose fate was dictated by a narrow group of people and a governing party backed by armed forces, will now become a part of the first multinational community based on truly democratic principles, sharing common values as well as the responsibility for the future of the whole continent. The precondition for the states of Central and Eastern

Europe to apply for membership in the Union was their adoption of the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

One of the eastern neighbours of the enlarged European Union will be Belarus, ruled by Alexander Lukashenko. Ten years of his autocratic reign has brought the country into deep political isolation. This isolation, however, should not include those who wish to cooperate with Europe.

One of the hallmarks of a regime lacking in freedom is the resignation of citizens from public activity and their withdrawal in face of any expression of concern or responsibility for public affairs. This is the situation one sees in Belarus, where citizens are exposed on a daily basis to violations of their basic rights, such as the right to freely disseminate information or express themselves. The criminalization of free-thinking Belarusians and their persecution at work or at school are facts of life and so are arbitrary changes in legislation that suit the whims of the administration. The acceptance of repression and corruption as a social-political standard in unfree conditions leads to the pervasive attitude that everyone ought to care primarily about his own good; that public activity is foolish, and the criminalization or even disappearance of fellow citizens is just a consequence of their carelessness. However, the external view of Belarus as a society of citizens resigned to such a fate is balanced by a number of activists and groups. These people are well-known by Lukashenko to be the greatest opponents of corruption and the germs of truly free decision-making that may gradually develop into free elections. In other words, a free future for Belarus depends on the present activity of independent civil initiatives.

Belarus apparently focuses its attention on traditionally close ties with Russia and is not much concerned about Europe. Nevertheless, there is an upcoming generation that sees its future precisely in the European Union. It includes mainly those who try to point out corruption and the lies and distortions in official information, regardless of their own comfort and often even their safety. Similar to the Czechoslovak, Polish, or Hungarian dissent during Communism, this is a minority, the influence of which may seem to be marginal and its chances of achieving better conditions next to nil. Perhaps this is the main source of the Europeans' misgivings, scepticism, and sense of helplessness about the fate of the Belarusians, their new neighbours.

Up to now Europe has primarily coped with the existence of Lukashenko's regime through criticism and political isolation, but the time has come to lend support to those who appreciate Europe's cooperation and partnership. Quite clearly, in the case of Belarus this is not the official political representation but the democratic opposition, independent initiatives, students, and citizens, for whom a democratic Belarus is equal to a European Belarus.

It is my deepest conviction that the Europeans should not only isolate official Belarusian representatives but should also make available as many of their programmes and funds as possible to those who are keen to cooperate – despite

possible hindrances from the side of the ruling regime. Only in this way will there be a chance for a change in the local conditions and the establishment of prerequisites for free elections. Whether the Belarusians then decide to join Europe or not would be at their discretion, which should be respected by all. However, the door must remain open.

I believe that the future of Belarus is firmly linked with the future of Europe, as is the future of Europe with the future of a democratic and independent Belarus. I believe that partnership with the pro-European part of the Belarusian society may lead to something hardly anyone could imagine today – that Belarus will become another of the former communist bloc countries that experiences a triumph of democracy and becomes a part of a united Europe.

Article for leading European dailies was published at the end of March 2004.