

The Norwegian Government's strategy for Belarus

1 Introduction

The overriding goal of the Government's policy towards Belarus is to promote democratic development and respect for human rights. The efforts aimed at reaching this goal include actively supporting the Belarusian opposition and NGOs with a view to creating the basis for a transition to democratic governance.

The present strategy presents an overview of the Government's measures in this field. The strategy is also a response to the request made by the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament) on 19 December 2006 that the funds provided by Norway to the Belarusian opposition and civil society be increased and that a broad strategy for democracy support aimed at civil society and the opposition be developed (Resolution No 316 (2006-2007)). A general outline of the strategy was presented to the Storting by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 12 June 2007 in connection with the deliberations on Report No 27 (2006-2007) to the Storting on Norway's participation in OSCE cooperation in 2006.

In order to reach this goal, the Government has considerably stepped up Norway's project cooperation with Belarus. NOK 9 million has been allocated to the cooperation this year, as opposed to NOK 4 million in 2006 and NOK 1 million in 2005. A further increase is envisaged for 2008.

2 The international community's position

Belarus currently has an authoritarian form of governance that does not afford its people basic democratic rights. The political opposition is in a very difficult situation due to the lack of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association, election irregularities and the use of the penal code to prevent political activity.

In all probability, two opposition candidates received a relatively large share of the votes in the 2006 presidential election despite the fact that they did not have any real opportunity to campaign effectively. There was wide popular support for the demonstrations against the election rigging.

Since then, the opposition has been divided. In May the congress of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) decided to replace its 2006 presidential candidate, Aleksandr Milinkevich, with a collective leadership made up of four members of the most important opposition parties. It is hoped that the new collective leadership will serve to unify the opposition.

The deteriorating situation of the opposition forces and repeated human rights violations have led to the increasing isolation of Belarus by Western countries. The EU countries and a number of other European countries, including Norway, and the US have imposed travel and visa restrictions on some 40 high-ranking Belarusian officials.

The EU has also decided not to include Belarus in its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In November 2006, the EU presented a “shadow action plan” that shows what Belarus is missing out on by not opting for reforms. The plan contains 12 specific conditions that all have to be fulfilled by the Belarusian authorities before the EU would be willing to normalise its relations with the country: i) free elections, ii) free access to information, iii) freedom of association, iv) release of political prisoners, v) investigation of the circumstances surrounding disappeared persons, vi) an independent judiciary, vii) the cessation of arbitrary arrests, viii) cessation of unacceptable treatment of prisoners, ix) respect for the rights of national minorities, x) the right of trade unions and entrepreneurs to operate freely without government interference, xi) the abolition of capital punishment, and xii) willingness to accept assistance from the OSCE, the EU and other international organisations to strengthen human rights in the country.

Belarus also runs the risk of losing its GSP (Generalised System of Preferences) status in relation to the EU as a direct consequence of the country’s failure to fulfil its obligations under the ILO conventions.

The Belarusian authorities have been cautious in their response to the EU’s 12 conditions, and they have expressed that they consider them to be points for negotiation. This has been dismissed by the EU, but the dialogue continues.

There are differing views among the EU countries regarding the approach that should be taken to Belarus. Sweden and Lithuania are among the countries that have called for more dialogue and cooperation.

This year, the EU will contribute about EUR 5 million for social and economic development, good governance and development of the energy sector in Belarus.

The US has been very clear in its criticism of Belarus, and in 2004 it enacted legislation aimed at promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the country and at strengthening the country’s sovereignty and independence (Belarus Democracy Act of 2004). The US is providing substantial support to the opposition in the country, and although it has also advocated a stronger sanction regime for visas and freezing bank accounts than the EU, the US is following the EU’s line. This year the US has allocated approximately USD 10 million in assistance to Belarus, primarily for measures designed to promote democracy.

Russia is Belarus’ most important international partner, and the relations with Russia will be decisive for the further political and economic development in Belarus. Russia’s decision to increase energy prices shows that Belarus cannot count on continued Russian assistance in the future.

This development has also cast doubt on the plans for establishing a union between the two countries. President Lukashenka's ambition of creating a union between two equal partners under international law seems unrealistic in any case, and this is one of the reasons why the Belarusian authorities now wish to strengthen the country's contacts with Western countries. However, there are no signs that the country will implement far-reaching reforms, and Belarus is also concerned about intensifying cooperation with countries such as Venezuela, Iran, India and China. Plans to build the country's first nuclear power plant have been accelerated, in part with a view to reducing Belarus' dependency on Russian gas.

Belarus is the only European country that does not participate in the Council of Europe. In 1997 the country's guest status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) was suspended. The Council is following the political situation closely and has developed an action plan that includes measures such as student exchanges, education concerning political rights and civil society support, and the establishment of a Council of Europe information office in Minsk. The Council has also demanded that the disappearances of a number of opposition politician be investigated. During a visit to Minsk in January 2007, PACE president René van der Linden signalled that if reforms were implemented, Belarus would once again be welcome in PACE.

Belarus is a member of the OSCE, but is continually obstructing the work of the OSCE office in Minsk. No real projects are being implemented, and the office's main task is to monitor the situation in the country and maintain contact with the authorities. Belarus generally backs Russian positions in the OSCE, and this applies for example to Russia's criticism of the OSCE's efforts related to elections and election monitoring.

Belarus participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), but keeps cooperation to a minimum. The country has for instance not participated at political level in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) since the EAPC Security Forum in 2005. President Lukashenka has criticised the establishment of NATO infrastructure in the Baltic states and Ukraine's ambitions to join NATO. The position taken by the allies is that they will continue to cooperate with Belarus and clearly convey what the NATO countries consider to be deplorable conditions in the country.

The US and several EU countries have embassies in Minsk, and Sweden is planning to open one this year.

The European Commission has been given permission to establish a delegation in Minsk. Norway handles relations with Belarus from its embassy in Kiev.

3 Democracy-building

3.1 Political contacts

Norway's bilateral contacts with Belarus are very limited and in line with the restrictive line followed by the EU.

The Norwegian authorities have sharply criticised Lukashenka's regime on a regular basis. Norway's view has been conveyed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Norwegian and international media and through interventions at senior official level in the OSCE Permanent Council, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers and the North Atlantic Council, and through Norway's alignment with the EU's position on sanctions. Criticism of the lack of freedom of assembly and labour rights has been voiced in the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Norway has made it clear that it intends to increase its support for democracy and human rights projects in Belarus.

Belarus has on several occasions requested that Norway strengthen its contact with the Belarusian authorities, for example by resuming bilateral consultation at senior-official level and by strengthening contacts between parliamentarians. Belarus has also proposed concluding a number of bilateral agreements, including a free trade agreement, an agreement on combating organised crime and a transport agreement. Belarus is also interested in closer cooperation with Norway on energy and cleaner industrial technology. Belarus also wants Norway to actively support Belarus' efforts to obtain observer status in the Council of Baltic Sea States.

Norway is of the view that the political dialogue and practical cooperation with Belarus can only be developed to any appreciable degree if the regime strengthens the freedom of expression and assembly, and allows the opposition to operate freely in line with the EU's 12 conditions. At the same time, we have signalled a willingness to strengthen our dialogue and engagement in certain specific areas, such as measures to strengthen civil society and also to step up assistance to victims of the Chernobyl disaster.

The Government attaches great importance to intensifying Norway's cooperation and dialogue with other countries on developing a common approach to Belarus and on coordinating efforts in order to increase their impact. Similarly, Norway will draw on cooperation in the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe to coordinate international efforts and thus help to influence developments in Belarus. The Government will actively seek to put the situation in Belarus higher on the agendas of these international organisations.

The Government is of the view that it would be expedient to strengthen Norway's dialogue and contact with the Belarusian authorities with a view to influencing them to move in a more democratic direction. This can be done without breaking with the common Western line of partially isolating Belarus. Norway will make use of such a dialogue to stress the importance of Belarus' complying with the conditions set by the international community as regards democracy and human rights. At the same time we will point to Norway's broad engagement in the other countries in the region, underlining that we are willing to quickly step up our cooperation with Belarus in a large number of areas if the authorities show a willingness to implement reform.

The Government is also intent on showing that the restrictions that have been imposed are not targeted at the Belarusian people, and that increased contact between people in Belarus and Europe would be advantageous.

In the Government's view, there is a clear added value in Norwegian political parties' developing contacts with Belarusian politicians, both those belonging to the government parties and those belonging to the opposition.

The Government intends to

- strengthen its dialogue with the Belarusian authorities by conducting regular bilateral consultations at senior-official level
- take part in pilot projects in areas such as energy efficiency and cleaner production in which lower-level officials, representatives of the regional authorities and NGO representatives participate, paying particular attention to civil society ownership.
- consider offering training in Norway for lower-level officials. One specific measure that will be considered is inviting Belarusian officers to the Norwegian Defence CIS Centre to study its international activities as a means of enhancing Belarus' ability to participate in international operations.
- invite opposition politicians from the United Democratic Forces (UDF) to Norway during the course of the year.
- provide support for cooperation between Norwegian political parties and their Belarusian sister parties and encourage increased contact between parliamentarians.
- discuss with like-minded countries what approach should be taken to Belarus, focusing on how the Belarusian authorities can best be persuaded to implement democratic reforms.
- align ourselves with the US and the EU in stipulating concrete conditions as regards internal progress in Belarus before relations can be normalised, maintaining the current travel and visa restrictions and the freezing of assets for a number of high-ranking officials.
- support the Council of Europe's Plan of assistance activities for Belarus.
- discuss visa fees with other Schengen countries in order to promote people-to-people contacts
- discuss with the other member countries the conditions for giving Belarus observer status in the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and actively promote including Belarus in the technical cooperation under the CBSS.
- put the human rights situation in Belarus high on the international agenda by seeking to ensure that it is regularly discussed in multilateral forums such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe and in regional cooperation forums such as the CBSS and the Nordic Council.

- raise the situation in Belarus in contacts with the Russian authorities and urge Russia to help to strengthen democratic development in Belarus.
- cooperate more closely on Belarus with Sweden, which will shortly be opening an embassy in Minsk.

3.2 Democracy, human rights and civil society

Because of restrictions and stringent control of foreign assistance, it is difficult to make contact with democratic forces in Belarus. There are a number of legal and practical restrictions that prevent independent individuals and groups from working freely and effectively. Only registered organisations are allowed to engage in organised activities, and countless organisations have been shut down in recent years.

The only human rights organisation that is still operating at national level is the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. In principle, registered organisations may receive financial support, but funding from abroad is taxed at a rate of 40%. This means that it is extremely difficult to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus.

Because it is difficult to support the opposition and NGOs in the country itself, Norwegian efforts are also targeted at Belarusians living in exile in neighbouring countries. This support is primarily channelled through Norwegian and international NGOs, often in cooperation with like-minded countries, as well as through the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is the Norwegian authorities' most important cooperation partner as regards democracy-building measures in the country. The Committee has had a presence in Belarus for a number of years and has built up a broad network of contacts both in Minsk and in the regions. It cooperates with several media organisations, the journalists' association and a wide range of NGOs and independent cultural workers. The Committee also cooperates with Belarusian actors in offering legal and practical assistance and supports regional newspapers and alternative cultural programmes. Norway is not the only country supporting civil society in Belarus, but we probably reach more organisations at grass-roots level outside Minsk.

The Government intends to

- increase its support to civil society and human rights defenders in Belarus in cooperation with other donors and international and Norwegian NGOs
- support measures for disseminating information about oppositional democratic forces and the actual political and economic situation in the country and abroad
- promote information measures targeted particularly at groups that are not part of the established democratic movement, and support alternative cultural measures

- support capacity- and knowledge-building among lawyers, NGOs and other actors with regard to human rights and binding international conventions
- support measures targeted specifically at young people, both those who are organised and those who are not, and help them to establish and maintain contacts with Norwegian youth organisations such as the Norwegian Children and Youth Council, which is already cooperating with several youth organisations in Belarus.
- increase its support to the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, which offers programmes for Belarusian students in exile, for example by developing BA and MA programmes in political science.
- support student exchanges and training programmes under the auspices of the Council of Europe
- consider making cross-border democracy-building projects at grass-roots level in Belarus eligible for support under the EEA financial mechanisms in Poland and the Baltic states
- support victims of state persecution, for example by providing legal advice, legal assistance and material assistance
- help to ensure that students who have lost their place at an institution of higher education and workers who have lost their job are given an opportunity to find an alternative either in or outside Belarus
- help to strengthen the Council of Europe's efforts to clarify the circumstances around disappeared persons in Belarus, particularly as regards following up the report by Cypriot parliamentarian Christos Pourgourides, which was submitted in 2004.

4 The environment

Belarus was one of the most heavily industrialised areas of the former Soviet Union, and with its high population concentration, important transport networks, intensive agriculture and military installations, it has inherited many environmental challenges. There is a pressing need for increasing energy efficiency and reducing environmental costs substantially. Vast resources are still being used to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

The Government intends to

- assist the people in the areas most heavily polluted following the Chernobyl disaster. For example, the Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority will cooperate with local authorities and civil society actors to better enable the local population to deal with the problems.

- support measures to promote energy efficiency and cleaner technology, for example in cooperation with regional and local authorities.

5 Economic development

The Belarusian economy is dominated by state-controlled heavy industry. State-owned enterprises still account for 80-90% of GDP (just under USD 30 billion in 2005), and there is no sign that the authorities will be more open to a stronger, more independent private sector. Some state enterprises have invested in new technology, but in general there is a great need for investment and modernisation. The amount of private Belarusian capital available is modest, and with the exception of some Russian investors, foreign investors are staying away. The investment climate is marked by bureaucratic interference, state-directed wage increases, tax increases, etc. Arbitrary changes in legislation, rigorous inspections by the authorities, and arrests of company heads who refuse to follow the authorities' orders are aggravating the already poor framework conditions.

However, Belarus has been more successful in dealing with the economic and social consequences of the Soviet Union's collapse than many other CIS countries. The masses regard Lukashenka as a guarantor of order and stable socio-economic development. They feel that Belarus has done well compared with other CIS countries, where the rural population generally has a lower standard of living than they do. However, due to the lack of reforms, the country has made little progress in economic restructuring. This can be expected to pose considerable challenges in the long term. Moreover, the increases in the duties on and prices of energy imposed by Russia at the turn of the year have been responsible for a substantial loss of revenue (estimated at 20%), which has put more pressure on President Lukashenka than previously. In the longer term it is also clear that Belarusian industry and agriculture will need more investments and innovation. This will require more international cooperation.

Despite administrative difficulties and high taxes, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are showing signs of more activity. This sector is important in order to ensure jobs and lessen dependence on the state. SMEs are therefore an important engine of economic growth and transition to a market economy, and it is important to help strengthen this sector.

The Government intends to

- consider increasing private sector cooperation with Belarus in cooperation with like-minded countries
- support the establishment of a microfinance bank for SMEs under the auspices of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Bank that can help to promote economic reforms in the longer term

6 International coordination

Together with among others the Baltic countries and the US, Norway participates actively in the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE), where Belarus is discussed regularly. Norway also keeps in close contact with the EU and the European Commission and with Canada, the US, Switzerland, Ukraine, the World Bank, UNDP, the Council of Europe and the EBRD concerning assistance to Belarus. The Government will promote the establishment of a high-level group of internationally recognised experts set up to consider what approach the international community should take to the country, including the question of whether the isolation policy should be continued or replaced by closer dialogue and cooperation.

The Government intends to

- intensify cooperation with other donor countries and consider taking part in more joint projects
- support the establishment of an international high-level group charged with recommending strategies the West should employ in its approach to Belarus

7 Other measures

An important means of intensifying Norway's efforts in relation to Belarus will be to build expertise on the country in the research community and also to increase the Norwegian population's insight into the situation in Belarus with a view to promoting people-to-people cooperation.

The Government intends to

- encourage institutions such as the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment and the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, to develop research projects and contacts between research and educational institutions in Norway and Belarus.
- provide more information about the Government's support schemes for Norwegian actors that wish to cooperate with Belarusian partners

8 Follow-up

Measures that have been launched will be continually evaluated to ensure that they further the Government's overriding goal, which is to promote democratic development and respect for human rights and ensure that Belarus complies with its UN and OSCE obligations.

In following up this strategy, the Government will attach great importance to input from Norwegian and foreign cooperation partners.

A forum for coordinating Norway's approach to Belarus, headed at senior-official level, will be set up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.