

Policy Brief
Pontis Foundation/Institute for Civic Diplomacy

EU Democracy Assistance to Belarus:
How to Make Small Improvements Larger and More Systematic?

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Introduction:

Following the 2004 parliamentary elections and national referendum in Belarus, which were neither free nor fair, the European Union (EU) committed itself to further supporting civil society and the democratization process in Belarus.¹ To figure out the needs and possibilities to support civil society and independent media in Europe's last dictatorship, the European Commission supported a three-step process (hereinafter the Vilnius process) among others mainly with the assistance of the Government of Lithuania (GOL), including a workshop with independent experts organized by the Bertelsmann Foundation of Germany and the GOL on February 1-2, 2005 in Vilnius; the so-called special TACIS Commission meeting on February 10, 2005 in Brussels; and a concluding workshop to coordinate assistance for democratization and civil society in Belarus on February 17-18, 2005 in Vilnius. This policy brief contains the most important conclusions of the current process and outlines further possibilities for EU democracy assistance for Belarus and beyond.

Conclusions:

- The EC is increasing its assistance to Belarus from around €10 million annually to around €12 million each year in 2005 and 2006. According to an EC press release, "over €5 million will be available in 2005 alone to support civil society in areas such as strengthening NGO capacity, promoting awareness of and respect for human rights and democracy, promoting cultural diversity, and the fights against poverty and intolerance."²
- However, only €2 million out of the annual €12 million will be available through grant mechanisms independent of the Government of Belarus (GOB) and aimed at direct democratization and civil society programs: the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Decentralized Cooperation Budget Line (DC). The majority of the assistance will go through the TACIS programs to serve "to address the

¹ Based on the conclusions of the Council of Ministers of the European Union (the Council) on 22 November 2004.

² See http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/belarus/intro/ip05_326.html

needs of the population, as well as to support democratization and civil society in a broad sense.”³ It is worth mentioning that the GOB participates in selecting grantees under the TACIS program and selected projects have to register with the GOB. In addition, TACIS has a strong tendency to select apolitical projects to remain eligible to register the selected grants with the authorities.

- While the importance of TACIS for Belarus is doubtless, the difference between the funding available for TACIS and independent support mechanisms is simply too high, especially given the existence of numerous difficulties of TACIS projects with the authorities, such as holding back on signing of financing agreements. The TACIS National Indicative Program for 2005-2006 (€10 million) has not yet been signed by the Belarus side, and this has delayed progress in finalizing the 2005 National Action Program.⁴ Based on the protest of the GOB against the Vilnius concluding workshop, it is expected that the TACIS projects will be further blocked by the GOB.⁵ One of the possible targets could be the newly supported 14 projects of the TACIS Institutional Building Partnership Program (IBPP), since these projects have to seek registration with the Belarus government.
- Both local and international experts, as well as the Heads of EU missions are arguing for an increase in direct assistance to democratization since the absorption capacity of Belarus civil society is significantly higher than the funding available. This statement is suggested by the experience of other international grantmakers in Belarus (both US and EU members – the annual assistance of the Netherlands toward civil society of Belarus is higher), the short policy paper made by the Scientific Research Mises Center⁶, but also the high number of applicants (68 eligible) in the last call for proposals of TACIS IBPP in July 2004, out of which 14 were supported by the Commission just recently. Considering the fact that the next presidential elections are expected to be in 2006, the absorption capacity is likely to be only growing.
- A question remains regarding the effectiveness of the “alternative” mechanisms (EIDHR and DC), e.g. the coordinated strategy behind these mechanisms. It is unlikely that these mechanisms are ready for pre-1989 conditions. For example, neither of these mechanisms is eligible to support non-registered, non-governmental organizations, while in Belarus delegatization of civil society organizations is a clear goal of the regime. In addition, supported projects should be able to receive their grants outside of the country, since any foreign assistance sent directly to Belarus has to go through the presidential administration fund. While it is necessary to recognize the willingness of the EC (officers) to even derogate some of the regulations, the question of coordination and selection of supported projects and especially the strategy of the EC as a grantmaker toward civil society in Belarus still remain unanswered. In this respect, especially US public grantmakers, but also EU member-state experience supporting civil society and democratization projects in Belarus (such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Slovakia) should be taken into consideration.

³ Nonpaper TACIS Management Committee, 10 February 2005, p.5

⁴ More see at Nonpaper TACIS Management Committee, 10 February 2005

⁵ The statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus from March 18, 2005 and the protest of the MFA indicate further steps of the regime against EU funded organizations/projects as well the EU in general (including members of EU diplomatic missions in Minsk). According to Charter 97 website, while speaking at a March 17 meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Denis Sidorenko, deputy head of the Belarusian delegation to the organization warned that all EU-funded projects which have not been authorized by the government, would be regarded as unlawful.

⁶ The paper of the Mises Center entitled “Time for Breakthrough” was available at the concluding workshop of the EU in Vilnius, 17-18, 2005

- To increase the impact of the allocated funding through the “alternative” mechanisms, direct funds for democratization should identify clear priorities for selecting projects to support civil society and democratization. Previous experience suggests the following priorities should be taken into account: increase information (support independent print media to increase the number of copies and internet-based projects), mobilization and participation of the population, research and analytical projects, and human rights protection.
- Additionally, the Commission should consider allocating funding for large-scale institutional projects, e.g. broadcasting, the Vilnius-based European Humanities University separately from the already allotted funds. Due to the self-isolation efforts of the GOB and lack of European presence in Belarus, establishment of the Delegation of the European Union in Minsk should be a strong short-term priority of the Commission.
- Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the importance of the so-called “Vilnius Process” toward Belarus, but also within the EU. The process – especially the two workshops in Vilnius – have brought together relevant EU and state officials with practitioners from international and Belarusian NGOs to widen the possibilities of the EU assistance toward democracy. In the long run Belarus could serve as a clear case study to create more flexible structures to serve the democracy assistance needs worldwide which the Commission should take into serious consideration within the newly established European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument.⁷ The so-called “European Fund for Democracy” (in other documents the “Special Fund for Belarus”) has been offered by several organizations and expert documents⁸ should be considered as part of the new mechanism to be set up to strengthen European democracy assistance within the European Neighborhood Policy.⁹

⁷ The European Commission is replacing the existing range of financial instruments for the delivery of external assistance. Instead of the current wide range of geographical and thematic instruments (including TACIS and EIDHR) that has grown up in an ad-hoc manner over time, the new framework will comprise six instruments only, four of them new. The four new instruments are: an instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, a European Neighbourhood and Partnership instrument, a Development Cooperation and Economic Cooperation instrument, and an instrument for stability. The Pre Accession Instrument will cover the candidate countries (Turkey and Croatia) and the potential candidate countries (the Western Balkans), while the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument will cover third countries participating in the European Neighbourhood Policy i.e. the countries of the south and eastern Mediterranean, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, and the countries of the southern Caucasus, thus replacing MEDA and part of TACIS.

⁸ The “Special Fund for Belarus” have been recommended by the first Vilnius workshop organized by the Bertelsman Foundation and GOL, the report of the Head of European Missions to the Commission on March 17. The European Fund for Democracy has been outlined by the Bathory Foundation of Poland on March 10, 2005, supported by the policy paper of CONCORD on March 16, 2005

⁹ A new fund matches the statement of the Statement of the European Conference “Enhancing the European Profile in Democracy Assistance, The Hague, July 5-6, 2004. See the statement at http://www.europeanforum.net/reports_article/114