

**Committee of the Regions****CIVEX-V-009****87th plenary session
1/2 December 2010**

**OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
on
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
INITIATIVE IN BELARUS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES
IN BELARUS AND THE EU**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recommends that the EU retain a comprehensive, open and structured dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, opposition movements and civil society and inform Belarus that ratification of the PCA and effective use of all European Neighbourhood Policy Instruments (ENPI) and their economic advantages are still possible if in exchange the government is prepared to make genuine changes and respects the rule of law and human rights and, in addition, if it carries out reforms to strengthen local and regional authorities;
- supports the continuation and extension of current forms of territorial cooperation with Belarus, inter alia, through appropriate INTERREG programmes in EU border regions and encourages the local and regional authorities there and NGOs to become involved in further projects in order to foster cross-border connections and make borders more open;
- strongly urges the Belarusian government to also include representatives of the opposition in the Belarusian delegation to the parliamentary EURONEST assembly;
- invites representatives of Belarusian local and regional authorities and representatives of democratic NGOs to participate as observers in assemblies of local and regional authorities from EU states, in order to promote twinning projects and encourage personal exchange among people;
- recommends even more strongly building on established discussion platforms, e.g. the Civil Society Forum or the Minsk forum at the Minsk office of the Association for International Education and Exchange in Dortmund (IBB Johannes Rau) and extending systematically and providing an institutional framework for dialogue between official representatives from Belarus, the opposition, NGOs, researchers and the media.

Rapporteur:

Werner Heinrich Jostmeier (DE/EPP), Member of the North Rhine-Westphalia Landtag

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

1. points to the significance of Belarus, its history, its cultural identity and its cultural heritage. It is precisely these factors which are turning Belarus into a key state in the overall development of Eastern Europe and a bridge between east and west in the further cooperation of the European Union with the states of the former Soviet Union. The participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership thus has major strategic, economic and cultural significance for our Member States;
2. acknowledges at the same time that historical and cultural development must be taken into account in the process of forging closer ties between Belarus and the EU, namely by carefully selecting and applying EU instruments for democratisation and modernising regional and local authorities;
3. notes that the progress of the Eastern Partnership in all countries participating in that partnership should be assessed on a differentiated and individual basis, especially because there is no universal formula for democratising countries, above all not for the former communist states in eastern Europe, which in their history have had only little experience of the rule of law, social mobility and market-economy freedoms. The Committee of the Regions understands that every country has its own history and thus can be allowed to develop at its own pace culturally, socially and economically;
4. stresses at the same time that a country like Belarus, which demonstrates a willingness to take part in the Eastern Partnership and is interested in normalising relations with the European Union and the Council of Europe must also be prepared to declare its support for universal human rights and abolishing the death penalty, and thus be willing to pursue and implement a genuine course of reform, for example by strengthening participation in twinning projects, extending city partnerships and discussion forums with civil society organisations and stepping up interregional and cross-border cooperation, especially with the neighbouring states of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. This is all the more important given that the European Union is re-evaluating its relations with Belarus in October 2010 and may draw some key conclusions for future cooperation and further participation in the Eastern Partnership;
5. points out that the Committee of the Regions, as the grassroots institution of regional and local authorities, is a genuine partner of Belarus for further cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. The various contacts lend themselves very well to communication with Belarus, with a view to making a bottom-up contribution to democratisation and improving the situation of the Belarusian people;

Strategic challenges of cooperation between the EU and Belarus and requests presented to the Belarusian government.

6. points out, however, that owing to insufficient efforts on the part of Belarus the EP has not yet been able to ratify the 1995 bilateral partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA) between the EU and Belarus, meaning that there is no formal basis for cooperation. As the only participating country from the Eastern Partnership, Belarus is not a fully-fledged partner of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and does not meet the standard requirements of the Council of Europe and the European Union, among other things, concerning the moratorium on death sentences and executions. For this reason, at present only individual multilateral programmes and instruments of the ENP can be used;
7. supports the EU's decision to strengthen ties with Belarus in particular by improving cross-border and interregional cooperation and to integrate Belarus through the Eastern Partnership initiative using ENP finance instruments, while making further integration dependent on progress in democratisation, the rule of law and the development of a civil society, with an eye to the EU's forthcoming re-evaluation of cooperation with Belarus in October 2010;
8. welcomes the fact that the Committee of the Regions has been asked by the European Commission to contribute to the Eastern Partnership and signals the willingness and commitment of local and regional authorities to use all available resources to support the Eastern Partnership and form closer ties with Belarus;
9. welcomes the fact that recently the Belarusian government has taken initial steps towards improving the human rights situation and the rule of law, such as releasing political prisoners, agreeing to the opening of a delegation office of the European Commission in Minsk and tolerating the civil society forum, which explicitly champions democratisation and strengthening civil society in Belarus;
10. notes with satisfaction that the use of ENP instruments and action programmes such as TAIEX or EIDHR, which promote democracy and human rights, has elicited some initial improvements in the political situation of Belarus;
11. furthermore welcomes Belarus' cooperation with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in electoral law and urges Belarus to continue this cooperation with an eye to the forthcoming presidential elections in late 2010/early 2011 in order to ensure that the elections are conducted fairly and transparently. This also means allowing international observers at the elections and granting them access to all electoral procedures, both before and after the vote;

12. would point out the importance of the election observation missions of the Council of Europe's Congress of European Municipalities and Regions, in which the CoR participates, and recommends that its joint delegations should also be involved in the future in observing local and regional authority elections in Belarus;
13. welcomes the overwhelmingly positive development of relations between Belarus and other Eastern Partnership countries since early 2009. The diplomatic activities between Belarus and Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan point to an independent, multilateral development of regional cooperation among the countries between the Baltic and Black Seas;
14. notes with concern, however, that relations between the EU and Belarus are at risk of stalling as a result of a renewed increase in human rights violations in Belarus, systematic repression against independent non-governmental organisations and the disappointing conduct of local elections in the first half of 2010, during which only two percent of the 25 000 candidates allowed to take part nationally were from the opposition;
15. at the same time is seriously concerned about the latest reports of infringements of press freedom and obstructions to the work of foreign media correspondents, restrictions on the freedom of ethnic minorities in Belarus, the carrying out of two death sentences in March, restrictive measures and programmes directed against the opposition in the run-up to the local elections and the nationwide campaign by the Belarusian secret service against the "Tell the truth" campaign on 18 May 2010, during which numerous apartments and offices of the opposition were searched. The Committee of the Regions notes with increasing concern the government's current repressive measures to censor media freedom, especially the internet, which is hugely significant for communication among opposition movements and also has an important role to play in the forthcoming presidential election campaign;
16. strongly urges the Belarusian government to return to the path of democratisation and to put an immediate stop to the imposition and carrying out of death sentences, human rights violations, intimidation of civil society groups as well as to end the political, economic, social and cultural restrictions, prejudice and discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in Belarus;
17. calls on the Belarusian leadership to do its utmost to demonstrate significant progress in the following areas before the next presidential election: a functioning moratorium on the death penalty, comprehensive freedom of opinion, ensuring freedom of association and assembly, protection of religious freedom, ensuring political rights for opposition movements;
18. strongly urges the Belarusian government to also include representatives of the opposition in the Belarusian delegation to the parliamentary EURONEST assembly;
19. notes that fundamental modernisation measures are required in Belarus in connection with local and regional self-government, in order to:

- carry out administrative and tax decentralisation;
 - dissolve the asymmetric power structure between strong central and weak local or regional government in the allocation of financing and resources;
 - create better structural conditions for public-private partnerships to develop public services;
 - enhance the administrative capacities of local and regional government;
20. is convinced that this will help to improve the quality of life of Belarusian citizens. The Committee offers its support to moves to modernise local and regional authorities;
21. stresses that a renewed freeze in relations between the EU and Belarus would have negative consequences for the growing involvement of civil society and the current pro-European stance of the Belarusian people;
22. points to the importance of active urban partnerships between EU countries and Belarus, e.g. between Minsk and Bonn. With their wealth of experience, contacts and networks, urban partnerships are a key pillar of Belarus' continuing democratisation and closer ties with the EU. They motivate officials and citizens to offer their commitment and knowledge to such a partnership;
23. with a view to strengthening regional and cross-border cooperation, points to the key condition of good neighbourly relations with the EU Member States of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. They must be formed on the basis of friendship and ensure that all ethnic minorities have an appropriate political, economic, social and cultural role in their respective countries, thereby facilitating the development of a long-term, stable relationship in a spirit of mutual respect;

Policy recommendations for further cooperation:

24. recommends that the EU retain a comprehensive, open and structured dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, opposition movements and civil society and inform Belarus that ratification of the PCA and effective use of all European Neighbourhood Policy Instruments (ENPI) and their economic advantages are still possible if in exchange the government is prepared to make genuine changes and respects the rule of law and human rights and, in addition, if it carries out reforms to strengthen local and regional authorities;
25. strongly recommends that in future the EU makes its endorsement or implementation of humanitarian aid projects and use of financial instruments even more contingent on progress in respecting human rights and establishing a functioning moratorium on the death sentence in Belarus. At the same time, the EU must attach even greater importance to ensuring that allocated resources are used purposefully and that they promote humanitarian development and development of the rule of law and do not serve to strengthen the authoritarian structures and authoritarian regime in Minsk;

26. advises the EU to continue to closely monitor the development of the domestic political situation in Belarus until the forthcoming presidential elections in late 2010/early 2011 and only afterwards to draw conclusions for further cooperation and not to carry out a re-evaluation scheduled for autumn 2010;
27. calls on the CLRAE to observe the Belarusian elections to see whether the preparations and conduct meet the general conditions of the Council of Europe; the CoR offers to continue to cooperate on election observation;
28. advises the EU to submit a special interim report by early 2011 on relations with Belarus since the resumption of contacts with that country in October 2008. The aim is to carry out a self-critical assessment of its engagement with Belarus over the past 24 months and to draw conclusions for further cooperation with democratic NGOs from Belarus;
29. recommends that all European institutions continue to join forces with democratic stakeholders in Belarus and in particular to strengthen contacts with local and regional authorities in order to act as a counterbalance to the concentration of power in Minsk. The aim here should be to actively involve open and democratically minded opinion-formers primarily at local level and in the border regions of the EU Member States in cooperation discussions, in order to have a positive bottom-up influence on the domestic political situation in Belarus;
30. recommends even more strongly building on established discussion platforms, e.g. the Civil Society Forum or the Minsk forum at the Minsk office of the Association for International Education and Exchange in Dortmund (IBB Johannes Rau) and extending systematically and providing an institutional framework for dialogue between official representatives from Belarus, the opposition, NGOs, researchers and the media;
31. recommends that the further substantive development of dialogue with pro-democracy movements and opposition parties in Belarus should focus, first and foremost, on the subject of media and press freedom: since late autumn 2009, the Belarusian government has adopted various measures to obstruct the domestic and foreign press and to regulate the internet, which are hampering independent and unfettered reporting as well as the activities of opposition movements. Unrestricted reporting is of key importance, above all in relation to the forthcoming presidential election campaign in late 2010. The CoR can make an important contribution to promoting dialogue on democracy with Belarus by urging all authorities in that country to use the technologies and possibilities of the new media in particular (including YouTube, weblogs, Twitter and other social networking tools) to facilitate the work of opposition movements;

32. calls on the national authorities of Belarus, in accordance with the instruments of the Eastern Partnership, to enter into open, systematic dialogue on decentralisation and the consolidation of local and regional authorities in the Belarusian political system and identifies the following areas:
- "good governance" and cutting red tape;
 - a sustainable social and economic development and cohesion policy;
 - matters concerning border traffic;
 - environmental protection;
 - cultural activities;
 - better environment for small and medium size enterprises;
 - "interpersonal contacts" (youth exchange and urban partnerships);
33. invites representatives of Belarusian local and regional authorities and representatives of democratic NGOs to participate as observers in assemblies of local and regional authorities from EU states, in order to promote twinning projects and encourage personal exchange among people;
34. supports the continuation and extension of current forms of territorial cooperation with Belarus, *inter alia*, through appropriate INTERREG programmes in EU border regions and encourages the local and regional authorities there and NGOs to become involved in further projects in order to foster cross-border connections and make borders more open;
35. encourages the border regions in the EU Member States of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia in particular to continue to step up cross-border cooperation with municipalities and regional authorities in Belarus, for example in the following areas:
- border traffic, customs, promoting mobility (visa facilitation) to simplify the cross-border movement of travellers and make it easier for people from Belarus and bordering EU countries to meet one another;
 - migration, measures to tackle organised crime;
 - cross-border environmental protection issues;
 - promoting the economy and facilitating cross-border trade;
 - supporting vocational basic and further training;
 - joint cultural events, e.g. concerts, art exhibitions and events to improve the joint historical culture of remembering and thus to reappraise the enduring effects of war on interpersonal relations;
36. is in favour of continuing to use ENP instruments to strengthen cross-border exchange among pupils, students and teachers (ERASMUS, TEMPUS), in order to improve communication between people from Belarus and the EU Member States and thus to promote the European idea and awareness of civil involvement in Belarus.

Brussels, 2 December 2010

The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Mercedes Bresso

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	The implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative and the development of cooperation between local and regional authorities in the EU and Belarus.
Reference(s)	
Legal basis	Art. 307(4) TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 39b and 42 of the Rules of Procedure
Council referral/European Commission letter	
Date of the Bureau decision	13 April 2010
Commission responsible	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
Rapporteur:	Mr Werner Jostmeier (DE/EPP), Member of the North Rhine – Westphalia State Assembly
Explanatory memorandum	12 May 2010
Date adopted by commission	12 October 2010
Adopted in commission	12 October 2010
Result of the vote in commission	By majority
Date adopted by plenary	2 December 2010
Previous Committee opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Opinion of 22 April 2009 on "The role of local and regional authorities within the Eastern Partnership" (CdR 78/2009¹); – Opinion of 9 October December 2008 on "A strong European Neighbourhood Policy" (CdR 134/2008²); – Opinion of 7 February 2008 on the "Black Sea synergy initiative" – (CdR 155/2007³); – Opinion of 11 October 2007 on "Local and regional government in Ukraine" (CdR 34/2007⁴); – Opinion of 14 April 2005 on the Communication from the Commission – European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper COM(2004) 373 (CdR 336/2004⁵).

1 OJ C 200, 25.8.2009, p. 31.

2 OJ C 325, 19.12.2008, p. 87.

3 OJ C 105, 25.4.2008, p. 46.

4 OJ C 305, 15.12.2007, p. 20.

5 OJ C 231, 20.9.2005, p. 58.