

The EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague, 7 May 2009

On 7 May 2009, the Czech Presidency of the European Union will convene the founding summit of the Eastern Partnership. This very important development will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to the fostering of democracy, and the dissemination of the guiding values of the EU and its member states, to countries where the tangible democratic development of society continues to be elusive. It is especially important that the summit expressly supports the efforts over many years of citizens actively supporting the rule of law and respect for human and civil rights, and that it rewards them with a guarantee of better conditions.

According to the recent statements of the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karel Schwarzenberg, and of a number of representatives of the European Commission, consideration is being given to extending an invitation to the summit to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. This information has drawn outrage from independent initiatives and opposition forces in Belarus, and we, the undersigned non-governmental organisations and individuals in the Czech Republic, also believe that it would be an inappropriate step.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Lukashenko is accused of collusion in the disappearance and death of several of his opponents. The series of elections through which he has been elected to the presidential office have not been recognised by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). He has created a very repressive environment in Belarus, where bureaucratic obstacles and police harassment impede all independent activities, non-state media, and all political activities that are not directly organised and controlled by the state. There are no internationally recognised political prisoners in Belarus today, but repression against politically active individuals continues. One of the forms it takes is the forced conscription of young people into military service, even in cases where doctors have confirmed that they are unfit for service (see the case of F. Viachorka, I. Shyla, and Z. Chvedaruk).

The Eastern Partnership should bring benefits to Belarusian society as a whole. For this reason, the EU should initiate and lead a dialogue not only at the level of the highest state representatives, but even more so at the level of civil society actors working for democratic development. In the case of Belarus, even the legitimacy of the election of the head of state is in doubt, which makes it all the more important to conduct a dialogue with Belarusian society in broader terms.

We would therefore like to propose that the Eastern Partnership be presented not only to the head of state of the Republic of Belarus, but also to representatives of Belarusian civil society – the political opposition, non-governmental organisations, and the independent press. We are able and willing to support the formulation of the appropriate parts of the Eastern Partnership programme by extending the co-operation of experts and professional organisations in the civil sector of the Czech Republic.

The extension of an invitation to Lukashenko to participate in this important summit is unacceptable until very specific conditions have been met. The tiny haphazard steps that have been taken to date in Belarus have had minimal impact on the freedom of individuals, media and non-governmental organisations, and cannot be regarded as sufficient to merit the EU's offer of dialogue with Belarus. The top political leadership of the Czech Republic should adopt a more principled position and, within the framework of the Czech EU Presidency, should spell out to the Belarusian regime clear conditions underpinning the offer of dialogue. Empty gestures cannot suffice. .

We contend that an unambiguous commitment to undertake the following steps can serve as the basis for an invitation by the EU to the Belarusian head of state to attend the Eastern Partnership summit:

- First and foremost, the cancellation of paragraph 193-1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, which penalises activities undertaken by unregistered organisations, punishment for which includes imprisonment;
- revision of “Process 14”, with the aim of cancelling unjust court decisions, through which in 2008 14 young people were given suspended sentences of imprisonment, house arrest, and fines for participating in a protest of entrepreneurs in Minsk in January 2008;
- revoke the conscription for military duty of Ivan Shyla, Franak Viachorka, and other young political activists who were conscripted in spite of the reservations of doctors, thereby raising the suspicion that they were conscripted on account of their political activities; and furthermore to ensure that there is no further abuse of §415 of the Criminal Code (in reference to performing military service) – see the letter from the Human Rights House Foundation to the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Belarus from 21 January 2009;
- achieve concrete results in co-operating with the OSCE and the Belarusian democratic opposition on revisions to the Electoral Law, including essential legislative steps towards the acceptance of the agreed changes in a realistic time-frame.
- as a matter of course, existence of no political prisoners in the country.

The Czech Republic itself has witnessed totalitarian rule on its own soil, and is acutely aware of the importance of providing support to those who dare to oppose it. Therefore it has always supported the democratic opposition and human rights in Belarus. We believe that the Czech Republic should not retreat from this standpoint during its EU presidency; on the contrary, the Czech Republic should draw on its own experience during the negotiations to initiate a dialogue with the Belarusian regime, and should continue to do so in all subsequent exchanges.

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