



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Food for thought series Why Belarus is different

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Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Rue du Commerce 20, 1000 Brussels



The event, part of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies 'Food for thought' series, analysed the unique situation of Belarus today. The event was co-organised with the Office for a Democratic Belarus. The panel welcomed Senior Analyst at *Belarus Digest* and Chief Analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre **Siarhei Bohdan**, Programme Officer for European Endowment for Democracy **Jana Kobzová** and Senior Analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies **Dzianis Melyantsou**. The panel was opened by Martens Centre Director **Tomi Huhtanen** and moderated by Martens Centre Research Officer **Ingrid Habets**.

In his introductory remark, **Tomi Huhtanen** said that the main debate regarding Belarus was about sanctions. Regarding the Eurasian Economic Union, he noted that it was not considered as a counterweight to the EU, but that it raised questions regarding closer ties between Belarus and Russia as well as interrogations on its impact on the Belarusian economy. He also raised the possibility of recent Ukrainian events taking place in Belarus.



Dzianis Melyantsou highlighted the differences between Belarus and the rest of the Eastern Partnership countries. He then outlined the new 'social contract' in Belarus, highlighting that the country had recovered after the 2011 crisis. This and fear that recent events in Ukraine could spill over explain President Lukashenka's rising popular standing. He added that although demand for reforms is high, the population favours peace and order over revolution. Sectors in which Belarusians



want to see changes are healthcare, social payments, the economy and education. He added that domestic support for opposition parties was very low (15%) and said that a 'Ukrainian scenario' was impossible in Belarus, because decision-making is very hierarchical, the state controls most of the economy and therefore of the labour force, corruption is relatively low and the country has a certain uniformity. He also stressed that Belarus does not jeopardise what Russia sees as its strategic interests.



Siarhei Bohdan spoke mainly of the relations of Belarus with Russia. He agreed with Melyantsou that no major Ukrainian factor applied to Belarus. The main emphasis of Bohdan's intervention was that Belarus cannot ignore its geographical situation. He stressed that Belarus was trapped between the periphery of the EU and the core of Russia. He added that accepting geography did not mean capitulation and referred to Lukashenka's foreign policy since 1994, claiming that his compass had not been blind integration to Russia. He mentioned that according to Lukashenka, Russian President Vladimir Putin has no intention of re-creating the USSR, and that this rhetoric of the Belarusian president is for domestic use only.

Jana Kobzová focused mainly on EU–Belarus relations. She began by noting Lukashenka's longevity in power (twenty years). She explained this by the lack of internal conflict, low corruption and relatively good governance, albeit without democracy. She stressed that talks between the EU and Belarus had seen very slow progress since 2010. She drew a parallel with Azerbaijan, where the situation of political prisoners is worse than in Belarus, but where the EU is much more active due to its strategic interests. She said that the EU could deliver



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on health and education in Belarus in order to change the way Belarusians perceive the EU. She added that the EU ought to work with businesses and state agencies not involved in government repression so as to broaden its outreach. She added that the EU should also focus on the civil society and adopt a clearer communication strategy so as to help Belarusian citizens understand what the EU is about. Half of the population does not know about the EU sanctions, and the other half does not know why sanctions have been implemented.



The contributions of the panel were followed by a questions and answers session which covered topics such as EU mechanisms for CSOs, the Belarusian foreign policy compass, the strategy for the opposition and the 2015 presidential election.