

Remigijus Šimašius, CPI Senior Policy Analyst was invited to speak at the Belarus Coordination Council July 19, 2023 meeting

# **ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF EUROPEAN WAY FOR BELARUS: WHAT IS OUR GOAL AND HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE IT?**

**On July 19, 2023**

Find below the highlights from Remigijus' contribution.

Belarus' integration into the EU is fundamentally a technical question, which will be answered once other key questions are answered.

First of all, does Belarus itself actually want EU integration? I welcome the idea expressed by the president Sviatlana Tsichanouskaya during the side events of the NATO summit in Vilnius, that **Belarus is choosing the Transatlantic orientation**. There is no clear way to understand what do people of Belarus actually want. This declaration, however, is a real step in consolidating pro European powers and provides more certainty on Belarus pro European orientation.

Second question: does the EU want Belarus as part of European family? The answer is definitely yes. This goal is well understood by Lithuania, Poland and Latvia. Belarus still seems distant, not properly understood and not hugely important to the Western Europe. **The statement that Belarus is welcome to join the European family is not just a symbolic gesture**. The EU has a comprehensive plan of economic support for a future democratic Belarus of 3 bn Eur from 2021, which will be activated once the country embarks on democratic transition.

Third question: what to do with the current dictator of Belarus who has captured the country and is pulling it in the opposite direction away from the EU? The good and the bad news is that the answer highly depends not just on Belarus people, but also on the fourth factor: Kremlin.

Fourth, and, unfortunately, the most crucial question, is Russia. Russia tries to show it to Russians, Belarusians, the whole world, that Belarus is almost the same as Russia, a natural appendix to Russia. First of all, this is not true historically. A good example is that Lithuania and Belarus share the same historical flag. Lithuania is, and is rightly perceived, as a natural part of European culture and values. The same then should be true for Belarus.

**The Kremlin narrative of neglecting the existence of sovereign Belarus nation is not true today as well.** We just have to take a look at how differently Belarus people perceive Kremlin aggression in Ukraine. Hopefully the attempts of Russia to keep Belarus in its own influence will not work out Tomorrow as well.

The question of how to escape Russia's sphere of influence is still the most important question. The transition is never easy. Lithuania and the Baltic states were successful in grasping the momentum, and left with relatively small sacrifice. Ukraine did not use that momentum, and it is paying a huge price. The reality is that Russia attacks a country when it tries to reduce its influence and as a consequence starts to get more successful. If it just can attack, of course. **It is a big challenge for Belarus to be decisive, not to lose the momentum when there is one. Or, even better, to create momentum.**

The path to Europe will not be easy. **Russia still has military power to prevent it, as well as energy blackmail tools to make it difficult after the breakout.** The answers to these challenges are not easy.

When the above is solved, and we may get back to normal, to tactics of the integration, then the advice would be to go with the integration as fast as possible and as radical as possible. Even if something is not completely right during the alignment of the EU legislation with the interest of Belarus, these would not be the main issues. The Lithuanian, Baltic, Polish examples support this approach. **Countries that had the shock therapy and the most radical reforms before the EU accretion, during the EU accretion, and after the EU accretion, are growing in the fastest manner.** We may just take a look at how Lithuania's GDP per capita bypassed not only almost all countries of CEE (which were far ahead of Lithuania 30 or 20 years ago), but also bypassed quite some of the so-called Old Europe (which were even further ahead back then).

Everything depends on Belarus people at the end of the day. The biggest encouragement for its European integration should be a clear understanding that the **Western world brings freedom, prosperity and peace, while Russia today is the guardian of the ugly and collapsing world.** It is neither megapower nor successful, and does not have to offer anything. Maybe just cheap energy. But even this benefit is both challenged by innovation, as well as used by the self interest of the Kremlin gang to be a tool to exploit and blackmail.

To sum up, I have no doubt that **Belarus will get out of the Kremlin trap, will come back to the European family, and that it will bring huge benefits to Belarus people.** My deepest sympathy to Belarus, as well as encouragement to stand for the future of Belarus.