

# BULLETIN

No. 87 (304) • September 14, 2011 • © PISM

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## Roundtable Talks in Belarus—Another Trick From the Regime

Anna Maria Dyner

*By releasing from prison many dissidents who were sentenced for participation in demonstrations after the presidential elections in December 2010 and offering roundtable discussions on economic issues to the opposition, the Belarusian authorities are trying to show they want to liberalize the political system, which is a condition set by the European Union for re-establishing political dialogue with Belarus. The aim of the Belarusian government is also to reduce the social discontent associated with the worsening economic situation in the country. The proposal for roundtable discussions should be used by the opposition, along with essential support from the EU, to prepare an economic reform agenda.*

**A Change in Policy Towards the Opposition.** In recent times, some change in the Belarusian authorities' policy towards the opposition can be observed. The releases of many political prisoners as well as proposals to representatives of the opposition for roundtable talks are signs of this change. The Belarusian authorities also are trying to persuade imprisoned opposition activists to write letters to President Lukashenko to request a pardon. So far, 13 opposition members have taken this step, and their letters were met positively and a pardon was granted. The authorities also stopped accusing some opposition leaders of conspiring against the government. One of the investigations of Natalia Radina, the editor of the portal Charter'97, as well as one conducted on Anatol Labedka, the president of the United Civic Party, were completed. Before that, two opponents of Lukashenko, Uladzimir Niaklajeu, the leader of the "Speak the truth!" campaign, and Vital Rymasheuski, the leader of Belarusian Christian Democracy, were released from prison. Another leader, Anatol Labiedka, also was released from prison and all three opposition leaders were given suspended sentences. Moreover, allegations against some opposition activists have been reclassified from "organizing mass riots," which carries up to 15 years in prison, to "participation in mass social unrest," which carries a maximum penalty of three years imprisonment. However, the authorities did not seek the acquittal of all political prisoners. Other dissidents remain imprisoned, including Lukashenko's opponents in the presidential election (Adrei Sannikau, Mikola Statkevich and Dzmitry Us).

Belarusian authorities have not limited their actions only to the release of some political prisoners. On 29 August, President Lukashenko made an offer to everyone who cares about the country, regardless of their political affiliation, to participate in roundtable talks dedicated to the economic problems of Belarus, which is an offer that is perceived to be made to the opposition as well. Also, observers from the EU and Russia were invited to the negotiating table.

President Lukashenko's current proposal for negotiations with the opposition is not the first such attempt. In 1997, Lukashenko set talks after a constitutional referendum. They ended in fiasco, however, because the opposition did not agree to a constitutional amendment to significantly extend the powers of the head of state to cover Lukashenko after he had violated the law. Another set of negotiations, conducted in 1999 under the aegis of the OSCE and before the scheduled parliamentary elections of 2000, also yielded no results. At that time, President Lukashenko further said that he saw no point in talks with the opposition. Dialogue with independent organizations was "softened" by an invitation to the talks that was issued to NGOs loyal to the president. Despite the failure of the talks in 1999, the opposition continued attempts to negotiate with the authorities on the democratization of electoral law and on allowing opposition parties to access the media during

the campaign before the parliamentary elections in 2000. Those demands were not met and, consequently, opposition parties boycotted the vote. In subsequent years, Lukashenko decided not to hold any talks with the opposition because of both his personal dislike of the opposition leaders and the relatively good economic times, which guaranteed social stability. In the past, however, talks with the opposition and the release of political prisoners brought Lukashenko measurable benefits. These moves resulted in both the mitigation of a negative social mood and the resumption of talks with the European Union, which allowed Belarus to obtain financial support, such as a stabilization credit in the amount of \$3.5 billion that was granted by the International Monetary Fund in 2009–2010.

**The Idea of the Roundtable Talks and Its Consequences.** The actions of the regime were mainly caused by growing economic problems in the state that not only may cause an explosion of social discontent but also may force the authorities to seek foreign financial support. Taking into consideration the previous experience of the Belarusian government's talks with the opposition, the proposal to create roundtable talks on economic issues must be treated as a step to neutralize the social discontent associated with an increase in food prices and municipal fees and the weakening ruble. Inflation between January and August increased by 53.6%, and the black-market dollar exchange rate (dollars are not available in regular exchange offices) reached 8,700 Belarusian rubles to the dollar. That means that from the beginning of the year, the ruble has lost 290% of its value against the dollar. By proposing the discussions, the incumbent president wants to be perceived as a compromise-seeking statesman.

The project of establishing the roundtable talks also shows that the government is fearing the country's growing financial and economic problems, which may lead to an explosion of social discontent that could become a real threat to the government. This fear is especially present since 8 October when the opposition announced a National Assembly, during which time Belarusians will be able to post notice of their political and economic demands to the authorities. The Belarusian president is apparently afraid of the North African scenario in which seemingly minor events lead to the overthrow of the government, as was seen in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Lukashenko expressed his concerns at an informal summit of the leaders of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) held on 12 August in Astana. During the summit, he asked for changes in the use of CSTO rapid-reaction forces so they could be used to suppress riots aimed at an overthrow of the government. That also demonstrates why both the clemency of dissidents convicted in political trials and the proposal to hold roundtable talks should be regarded as another one of the regime's attempts to create the appearance of a liberalization of the political system, which may allow for the resumption of a dialogue with the EU. The Belarusian authorities are counting on receiving another stabilization loan from the IMF for \$8 billion. This is the maximum amount that Belarus is entitled to, and a loan of this size was requested by the Belarusian government in May.

Lukashenko's proposal is a major challenge for the Belarusian opposition. If it participates and uses it to present a comprehensive program to improve the state of the economy, the opposition can benefit significantly in the eyes of the Belarusian society. But in a situation where the opposition would not join the talks, the proposal for roundtable talks could be used by the regime as a reason to discredit the opposition in the public eye and to claim it is a group of people who do not have any proposals about how to combat economic problems and are able only to initiate riots.

**Recommendations for the EU and Poland.** The actions of the Belarusian authorities are nothing new, but this is another chance to resume dialogue with the European Union and strengthen Belarusian civil society. Since Poland holds the presidency of the EU, it should set as a condition for the participation of EU observers in the roundtable negotiations the demand that Belarus release prisoners sentenced through political processes. This demand for release is not only for opponents of Lukashenko in the recent presidential elections but also for other dissidents and representatives of human rights organizations in Belarus.

At the same time, as the talks start and the Belarusian authorities conduct a real liberalization of the political system, EU countries could offer to help Belarus with reforms involving the transfer of knowledge and the giving of credit support. Regardless of whether the roundtable talks will take place (for example, if the opposition refuses to participate in them), Poland together with other member states can use the creation of a "European Endowment for Democracy" to increase financial and technical support for independent NGO's, think-tanks and non-governmental media. It also would be valuable to develop with international and independent Belarusian experts the first international economic recovery program for the Belarusian economy—a plan that should be widely disseminated in the country.