

## CONFERENCE REPORT MINSK FORUM XVIII

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# Belarus in Upheaval. Review of the situation and future perspectives

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In the run-up to the Minsk Forum XVIII, the German-Belarusian Society (dbg) was confronted not only with the unstable situation in Belarus as a result of the rigged presidential elections in summer 2020 but also with the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it was decided to organise the Minsk Forum as an online conference for the first time. The entire event was streamed live via a specially set up website ([minskforum.org/en](http://minskforum.org/en)) as well as on YouTube, with simultaneous interpretation into German, Russian/Belarusian and English; via a chat, the audience was able to participate in the discussion. The complete video recordings of all panels at the conference are available at [minskforum.org/en](http://minskforum.org/en).

Thus, despite the adverse circumstances, it was possible to attract a very wide-ranging spectrum of participants. Since the Minsk Forum regards itself traditionally as a platform for the broadest possible social and political dialogue, official state representatives were also invited this year; however, Minsk refused as a matter of principle.

**Christian F. Trippe** (Head of Deutsche Welle Eastern Europe Service) facilitated the conference programme. The Minsk Forum was made possible by funding from the German Federal Foreign Office and the support of the co-organisers (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies).

## OPENING, WELCOME AND KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

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As Chairman of the dbg, **Markus Meckel** opened the Minsk Forum XVIII reviewing the current situation in Belarus, a „country on the move“. Also referring to his personal experience in the GDR in 1989, he expressed his admiration for the endurance of the protest movement despite massive intimidation and violence. He said that this conference was also about creating additional attention for Belarus in Germany and promoting dialogue – across borders and within the country itself. A central question was how the path towards self-determination could be supported from the outside.

In his welcoming address, German Foreign Minister **Heiko Maas** also expressed his intention to support the non-violent protests in their demand for free and fair elections. He declared optimistically that „a new Belarus is emerging“ while „the old system is crumbling“; however, Lukashenka continued to „use batons instead of serious dialogue“ to stay in power. Therefore, the EU sanctions were aimed directly at him and the regime’s supporters. Reports of human rights violations had to be recorded so that criminals could be prosecuted subsequently. Maas expressed his gratitude in particular to Poland for its acceptance of representatives of the Belarusian opposition. He also addressed **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya** directly as a „symbol of the desire of the people“ in Belarus „for democracy, freedom and human dignity“ and pledged concrete support from Germany and the EU for this process. In her welcoming address, she herself referred to the numerous people who had been arrested and

also to the deaths and mentioned the young people in particular as those directly affected and children as those indirectly affected. Despite the repression, people continued to stand together, and solidarity was growing ever stronger. She thanked the Federal Republic of Germany for many productive meetings with government representatives and MPs and for their assistance to civil society, independent media and students. Tsikhanouskaya went on to say that Germany had the „chance“ to take on an even more decisive role and to encourage other states to defend democratic values and to send an unmistakable signal to the regime that without fundamental democratic change „business as usual“ was no longer an option. If the international community did not support Belarusians in their struggle for freedom, the crisis of democracy, which could also be observed internationally, would be exacerbated. The last few months had shown that dictators could not be „re-educated“. Only with the help of international partners could Belarus become a country where freedom of expression, the rule of law and a fair judiciary were respected.

Representing one of the most important neighbouring countries, Polish Foreign Minister **Zbigniew Rau** raised the question of what the situation in Belarus meant for the EU in his video message. One could not stand by and watch the events in Belarus, rather one had a moral obligation to support Belarusian civil society in its struggle for fundamental freedoms. Poland wanted Belarus to be a sovereign, democratic partner, but ultimately Belarusians alone should decide on their future and how and, above all, with whom they wanted to reform their country; interference from third parties would not be acceptable. Rau therefore called on Lukashenka to launch an „inclusive national dialogue“ involving all opposition representatives, including those in exile.

In his keynote speech, **Timothy Snyder** provided an overview of the historical context of the country putting the current situation into historical perspective. After a Belarusian national movement with its own language, literature and historical reference points had emerged in the 19th century – similar to the neighbouring states – the division of today’s national territory among Poland and the Soviet Union after the First World War produced a particularly complicated situation. While Poland suppressed Belarusian schools and cultural institutions from the beginning, Belarusian culture had been initially promoted in the Soviet Union. However, the Great Terror as of 1936 put an abrupt end to that, the educational elite was treated particularly brutally, and leading writers were murdered.

Snyder referred particularly compellingly to Germany’s historical responsibility to Belarus. The history of the Second World War was still recounted too little from the perspective of Belarus and other Eastern European territories, who had experienced particularly severe anguish due to their position between the National Socialist German Reich and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Nowhere else were more people killed in proportion to the total population. Hitler wanted to destroy the Soviet Union and control the western part of its territories. The Jewish population that had lived

there for half a millennium was almost completely wiped out, the remaining inhabitants enslaved, deported or left to starve. Large parts of Minsk as well as entire villages and small towns were destroyed. The region played a central role not only in the Holocaust, but also in the Nazi mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war, for example at Stalag 352. Finally, Belarus became the central theatre of the partisan struggle against the German occupation. In retaliation, the German Ordnungspolizei wiped out entire Belarusian villages; almost all the victims were unarmed. In some cases, women and children were executed while the men were left alive for forced labour.

After the war, a largely depopulated country was Sovietised, which meant that Belarusian culture continued to have a hard stance. Overall, according to Snyder, the central role of Belarusians as victims in history was not yet sufficiently anchored in (Western) European consciousness and was missing from the historical self-narrative of Europeans. At present, he said, it was certainly not a moment for the West to lecture the Belarusians but on the contrary to listen to them carefully – for a lesson on democracy and peace.

#### **PANEL 1: BELARUS AFTER FOUR MONTHS OF PROTEST MOVEMENT: HOW TO OVERCOME THE POLITICAL IMPASSE**

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At the beginning of the first panel, which was entirely composed of representatives from Belarus, moderator **Jakob Wöllenstein** (Head of the Belarus Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation) reminded the audience that official government representatives had also been invited to the Minsk Forum but had refused to participate. **Valery Karbalevich** (political scientist at the analysis centre Strategija) saw this refusal to engage in dialogue as a sign that the conflict could only be ended by the victory of one of the two sides, not by a compromise. In this context, he deliberately spoke of a Belarusian „revolution“ and a „cold civil war“ that had been going on for several months. Unlike in Ukraine, for example, the Belarusian revolutionary movement was not to be seen in any geopolitical context, so it was neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian but exclusively „pro-Belarusian“. Exploring the roots of the current movement, he quoted British journalist Edward Lucas' interpretation that „the demonstrators are trying to catch the train that left in the 1990s“. He said that the completion of the nation-building process in Belarus was not driven by an external threat from outside, as is often the case, but the threat „from within“. According to Karbalevich, the political model in Belarus was not based on trust in state institutions – these did not serve the population here, only the regime's hold on power – but on Lukashenka as a charismatic figure. Now, however, the reverse was happening with mistrust of him leading to deep political crisis. The central question was therefore how, in the context of an unprecedented socialisation of the citizens and the astonishingly rapid development of a civil society, the state apparatus could be broken and control brought into the hands of the populace, especially since the protest movement had so far not led to any split within the elites.

With regard to his former posts as minister and ambassador, **Pavel Latushka** was introduced by the moderator as probably the „highest-ranking personality who has changed sides“, and also as a potential candidate for future presidential elections in his function as founder of the National Anti-Crisis Management and member of the Coordination Council. The Coordination Council wanted to offer tools for dialogue, especially at the international level; for example, the suggestion was made that the EU should appoint a special representative for Belarus. In general, Latushka saw his country in a diplomatic crisis; the president was not recognised as legitimate, the independence of Belarus was in danger, which also posed a problem even beyond the borders for the regional security in Eastern Europe. In addition, there was a strong emigration process. While the EU maintained active relations with Belarusian civil society, Russia had limited itself to official exchanges with the regime since the beginning of the protests; Russia's reputation among the population was therefore declining. The big neighbour wanted to „force“ new elections or a constitutional reform, but this could not come from outside, especially not as long as the violence continued, and opposition members remained in prison. Latushka stressed that one could not change the constitution without first ensuring respect for the law and separation of power.

Sociologist **Axana Shelest** (Centre for European Transformation) called for a long-term view of events in Belarus: „It was a long road to revolution.“ While the development of state bodies and institutions had stagnated for years, the emancipation of society had progressed. At the latest since the spring of 2020 crisis and the beginning of the Covid crisis, Belarusian society had organised itself with numerous initiatives for concrete problem solving. In a similarly decentralised form, the revolutionary movement then developed from the summer onwards, initially without a coordinating centre or a common plan, while the traditional opposition and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had little capacity to act. Now, however, a „road map“ for the transition to power was needed, for which the anti-crisis management was making offers, but which were not yet really being widely discussed.

Urbanist **Andrey Karpeka** also pointed out that since the presidential election of August 2020, interaction with legitimate state organs and thus normal functioning NGOs had become practically impossible, which was why grassroots initiatives had become so crucial. Even among groups that originally embraced specific themes – for example, environmental initiatives – protest against state-organised violence had become the focus. These initiatives, however, had hardly led to institutional changes in view of the undemocratic decision-making process; the regime, for its part, stigmatised activists as „social parasites“. **Dzmitry Bandarchuk** (co-founder of the citizens' committee in Hrodna) also saw the aforementioned Covid crisis as an important starting point for social mobilisation, especially outside the capital. In Hrodna, for example, a round table with the regional government took place already in 2017, which subsequently made legal assemblies possible. Thus, it was possible initial-

ly to maintain a certain dialogue with the regional administration there even after the controversial 2020 election, but this was rendered impossible by the appointment of a new governor. The potential of civil society had nevertheless remained visible – partly in new and very local forms of protest; it had also become apparent that the Belarusian population had an additional „region“ in the form of the diaspora.

**Vadim Mojeiko** (Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies) noted with disillusionment that both parties to the conflict supported the idea of dialogue in their statements, but in doing so, they set conditions that were unacceptable to the other side. The state, for example, wanted to negotiate with „opportune“ representatives who supported the system in principle – a pseudo-dialogue that did not solve any problems. For its part, the Coordinating Council set out conditions, such as criminal proceedings against violent security forces, which the regime would certainly not agree to. Several months of protest had shown that neither side had enough forces to achieve victory; however, this was already a partial success for civil society, after all, only a few years ago protests had been crushed „within ten minutes“. In the current stalemate, the state was aiming at draining and intimidating the population, while the latter was betting on the collapse of the regime, especially under the economic problems (and sanctions). Instead of hoping for a true dialogue, Mojeiko suggested pushing for negotiations. Even without an agreement, this would be better than the current violent confrontation, which was also leading to a division of the nation.

Finally, the question of possible ways out of the crisis was discussed. There was agreement that new elections would have to be held first, but that this would require the release of all political prisoners and the punishment of those responsible for the violence. A change in the constitution should only be sought under a newly elected president. Until then, according to Latushka, a platform for dialogue in a third country would be conceivable, a round table with representatives of the current regime, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, victims of repression and exiles. On the question of whether the awakening of civil society could actually lead to a fundamental re-composition of parliament (also with representatives of the civic movement), several participants in the discussion stated that the population was not thinking about parliamentary elections currently, as this institution had de facto played no role so far; only when truly independent state institutions had been created – i.e. in addition to a free parliament, especially courts – could one talk about possible outcomes of parliamentary elections.

## **PANEL 2: BELARUS AND ITS NEIGHBOURS. PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION**

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In the second panel, moderated by **Cornelius Ochmann** (Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation), the focus was on the role of neighbouring states. **Marcin Przydacz** (State Secretary at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) opened by talking about the importance of good neighbourly rela-

tions, especially in Central Eastern Europe, with a view to the common but often complex history. Poland had always wanted a sovereign Belarus and had tried to support sustainable modernisation, economic growth, as well as democratic development. He referred to the idea of a „Marshall Plan“ and the EU's Eastern Partnership for constructive support of a democratic Belarus. He said that the current violence could not be regarded without taking action, but Belarus certainly did not need a „big neighbour“ to tell it which way to go – especially not under military or financial pressure. Like the panellists in the previous panel, Przydacz also saw an internal Belarusian dialogue as a precondition for any possible solution.

Political scientist **Margarita Šešelgytė** (Vilnius University) described a true democratisation in Belarus as an optimistic scenario, which she contrasted with a pessimistic perspective: Russia was currently very present in Minsk, and any constitutional reforms might only lead to bringing people to power who were more agreeable to Moscow than Lukashenka. And even in civil society there was no desire for geopolitical change, which was not necessarily compatible with the Lithuanian view of Russia. Another crucial question was how a future Belarusian government would deal with the Baltic neighbours' criticism of the Ostrovez nuclear power plant. However, this did not affect the great solidarity of Lithuanian society with Belarusian civil society, which made direct reference to the Baltic independence movement of 1989 with a human chain from Vilnius to the border. **Viktar Shadurski**, Dean of the Faculty of International Relations in Minsk, mainly addressed the geopolitical situation in his country, emphasising that he was not speaking on behalf of his university but as a historian at the Minsk Forum. For him, the current crisis was also based on internal factors; the question of relations with Russia on the one hand and with the West on the other hand did not play a prominent role – unlike in Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan, for example – even though the government had repeatedly spoken of alleged control of the movement from the outside. Any attempts to gain control over Belarus should be a thing of the past; Belarusian sovereignty and stability were also based on constructive pragmatic relations with neighbouring states – in the West and the East, symbolised by the expression „Belarus needs two wings to fly“.

**Michael Siebert** (Director for Eastern Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office) also pointed out that neither could EU flags be seen flying, nor anti-Russian sentiment heard at the demonstrations. In view of the domestic nature of the conflict, the German government was following the premise of non-interference. Similar declarations by Russia, however, were rather „lip service“, which became clear with the appearance of „state journalists“ and in the advice given to Lukashenka. The incumbent president had „lost all democratic legitimacy“ and had to immediately stop any repression of the population. With regard to the Polish initiative of a „Marshall Plan“, he said that the Federal Republic was ready for much closer cooperation with Belarus as soon as the preconditions were met. At present, the primary goal of cooperation had to be that the support actually benefited

the people on the ground (students, journalists, strikers, human rights initiatives, etc.) and not the regime. Specifically, Siebert referred to support in the area of media training and social media, a doubled scholarship quota, support for persecuted academics and simplified visa issuance for exiles. The German government continued to stand ready to provide mediatory support for a genuine national dialogue – but such a dialogue „cannot be conducted in a KGB prison“.

After the role of Moscow in the current crisis in Belarus had already been addressed many times, **Nadezhda Arbatova** (Institute for World Economy and International Relations) provided „one“, as she emphasised, but not „the“ Russian view. Russia had long regarded Belarus as a partner without any ambition to join NATO, while for the EU, Belarus was part of the Eastern Partnership, which the Kremlin viewed with scepticism. The protest movement, the extent of which surprised everyone, confronted Moscow with a number of difficulties: Lukashenka was considered unpredictable there after various provocations; but even if his personal retention of power was not important for Russia, it could not officially distance itself from him as a security ally – and the worst thing for Moscow would be the rise of a new, clearly pro-Western political leader. Russian intervention in Belarus would turn the population, which had never been anti-Russian, against Moscow; a new form of federation or annexation to Russia would bring Moscow a rebellious territory and very difficult international reactions. An internationalisation of this internal conflict should be avoided at all costs. Apart from sanctions, Arbatova saw very limited possibilities for the EU to exert influence. Although the direct neighbours to the West were in favour of clearer reactions, Berlin, Paris and Brussels were less willing to take actual political measures. Paradoxically, the scenario favoured by the leading EU states was in line with Moscow's ideal: A peaceful departure of Lukashenka, the release of all political prisoners, new presidential elections. While admiring Tsikhounskaya, Arbatova stressed that it would be very difficult for the protest movement to reach a peaceful solution to the situation without a leader in the country itself. Warsaw analyst **Anna Maria Dwyer** (Institute of International Affairs) focused on the military situation. The profound integration between Russia and Belarus in this area, expressed for example in a joint exercise, was worrying, she said, and the instability in Belarus was affecting security in the entire region. Within the framework of the OSCE, services could be offered for internal dialogue in Belarus.

In the concluding discussion, the question was raised how dramatic the situation would have to become before the EU realised that a dialogue with Lukashenka was not possible. According to Siebert, the dialogue would not necessarily have to start with Lukashenka, who could also make room for other representatives of the current regime who were more accepted by the people. It was also discussed whether the EU would not soon realise that Lukashenka's alleged plans for constitutional reform were only a bluff; Przydacz confirmed that there was indeed a great deal of mistrust in the EU – but presumably also in the Kremlin – towards the ruler. If there were no positive signals from Minsk, Eu-

ropean pressure would be intensified, especially by neighbouring states; Lukashenka would have fewer and fewer options. On the question of a possible Russian intervention, Arbatova reassured that such an intervention would only be conceivable after a massive outbreak of violence – which, however, Lukashenka could also provoke deliberately.

### PANEL 3: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC MODEL

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The business panel was prepared as part of the Eastern Partnership Business Days together with the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations and moderated by its Regional Director for Eastern Europe, **Stefan Kaegebein**. In his welcome address, the German Ambassador in Minsk, **Manfred Huterer**, emphasised that the solution of the current political crisis would also have a major impact on investment relations with Germany and the EU and thus on the economic prosperity of Belarus. Belarus with its tradition as a „bridge between East and West“, its infrastructure and its well-trained specialists could become an attractive economic partner, and Germany as a technology partner could support the modernisation and diversification of the Belarusian economy in many key areas. It was important to remove trade barriers, improve the investment climate for (especially small and medium-sized) enterprises, and help Belarusian companies enter the German market.

Economist **Kateryna Bornukova** (Belarusian Research and Outreach Center) recalled the stagnation of the Belarusian economy in the past ten years, due to a lack of reforms, especially in state-owned enterprises. Without a change in the political situation, international investments could not be expected, and without clear prospects for the future, Belarusians themselves would hardly start or expand businesses. With the migration of IT companies and the loss of confidence in the state and the banks, the risk of an economic and financial crisis was growing. Instability, mistrust in the legal system and financial problems were also among the most important obstacles to investment, **Alexandr Chubryk** (Director of the IPM Research Center) reported, drawing on a survey among private entrepreneurs. Expectations had declined in all sectors as compared to the end of 2019.

**Robert Kirchner** (German Economic Team) confirmed that there were worrying signs, especially in the former growth sector of IT. The Covid pandemic had worsened the already bleak economic situation and the state-centred economic model „is no longer delivering“. In the current situation, he said, it was very difficult for Belarusian businesses to get international support; credibility took time to develop but was lost quickly. **Eugeny Lobanov** (Center for Environmental Solutions) also seemed less optimistic about „green enterprises“, environmental and climate protection initiatives were hardly developed and despite some positive experience still too often seen as an obstacle to economic development. **Jeroen Willems** (Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission) saw a long-term key problem in the structural ineffi-

ciency of the Belarusian economy, especially in state-owned enterprises, where reforms were difficult. However, especially in view of loans from Moscow and the market, Willems did not yet see an acute risk of payment defaults.

For the second part of the panel, after the contributions on the current situation, the moderator asked for assessments of the future. Kirchner confirmed that Russia had always been ready for debt repayments in an emergency and that this had probably not changed. However, Belarus remained „on a short leash“ because Moscow had no interest in stabilising the current regime in the long term. Bornukova pointed out that Russian loans had so far only been received in part and had, moreover, been returned directly as payment for gas deliveries. Belarus had repeatedly expressed the goal of diversifying its exports (currently 40% go to Russia), but the economy would also have to be reformed for this to happen. Willems referred to the EU's work on an economic plan for a future democratic Belarus; in the event of political change, Europe would be prepared to increase financial support substantially. Belarusian society's view of the state and the market economy had changed dramatically in the last ten years, Chubryk stressed, and the population's desire for an expansion of the private sector would have to be taken into account by the state in any reform. Kaegebein pointed out that foreign companies needed partners in Belarus on an equal footing instead of disproportionate relations with state enterprises.

While **Stephan Hoffmann** (North IT Group) only very briefly pointed out that numerous Belarusian IT companies were currently opening offices in Ukraine and Lithuania in view of the situation on the ground, **Aleś Alachnovič** (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Commissioner for Economic Reforms) went into more detail in his commentary on the panel's contributions so far. In the absence of growth for the past ten years, he said, the much-demanded end to violence alone was not enough to drive the economy forward. But if the political response remained purely repressive, the economic crisis would be long and profound; foreign investors would not only stay away but, given the dramatic loss of confidence in the legal system, they would withdraw (further) capital from Belarus. Private companies considered „non-loyal“ were already being put under pressure by the authorities since the election campaign, and some might even be forced to leave the country. Such a weakening of the private sector would not exclude a renewed dominance of state-owned enterprises. In summary, Alachnovič described an economic situation that had been extremely difficult already before the current crisis but could not be improved without political changes. He named the high energy expenditure paid to Russia, the stagnation of this main trading partner and the low world market prices for fertiliser, the most important Belarusian export product, as important external factors; internal factors were the public debt, the inefficiency of state enterprises and the demographic situation.

In the final round, the panellists nevertheless tried to look ahead optimistically: next year, they hoped, it might already be possible to talk about the incipient international

support for a democratically elected government, the reform agenda and its initial successes, as well as regional development and governance. In his closing remarks, Ambassador Huterer pointed out that the topic of transformation should not only be about privatisation but also about a socially just transformation that avoids the mistakes of the past in other countries. Both capitalism shaped by oligarchs as well as shock therapy led to people feeling disconnected from the democratic market economy and turning to illiberal forces.

#### **PANEL 4: BEYOND MINSK: CURRENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGIONS**

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The panel on local civil society was organised jointly with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and moderated by political analyst **Artyom Shraibman**. By way of introduction, **Tatsiana Karatkevich** (citizens' movement „Tell the Truth“) reported on the will of people to participate in politics, also and especially outside the capital. It had been seen that this revolution also had a broad base in smaller towns and that the population remained active with creative and sometimes very local forms of protest despite the completely disproportionate repression. Belarus was experiencing a unique moment of decline of the old authorities, who refused to engage in dialogue at all levels. When asked, Karatkevich confirmed that „Tell the Truth“ also wanted to act as a political party in the future in order to bring people into parliaments and local assemblies who represent the interests of the population. As Director of the actually non-political Foundation for Rural Development, **Siarhei Tarasiuk** described the services that non-governmental organisations can offer for local initiatives. Often, it was mainly about advice and education, for example in the field of sustainability and digitalisation, and in his specific case also about supporting (local) entrepreneurial activity.

**Volha Karach** from the civil rights organisation „Nash Dom“ focused on new developments that she had observed in recent months. In the regions, a historical self-image and a local patriotism were developing that would have been unthinkable six months ago. The official downplaying of the Covid pandemic had brought about a change in the Belarusians' previously patriarchal understanding of the state. In the meantime, mobilisation was not progressing fast enough for many parts of the population, and local initiatives were overwhelmed with proposals. Her initiative was surprised at how many people without any type of civic experience, who knew nothing about how NGOs work, suddenly wanted to become involved. The synergy between local groups and the diaspora was an interesting new phenomenon – even people who did not originally emigrate for political reasons were very important for the communication of the protest movement, especially since the need for information was very high in smaller towns. The repression there was often worse than in Minsk, but just outside the social attention.

In the context of the protest movement active throughout the country, the focus was also on the independent trade

unions. In the view of the President of the Belarusian Confederation of Trade Unions (BKDP), **Aliaksandr Yarashuk**, state-controlled workers' organisations were no longer in keeping with the times. Nevertheless, a true rebirth of the free trade unions could only take place after fundamental political change in the country. Under the current regime, their existence was threatened, and they were not permitted in state-owned enterprises anyway. Many strike committee members had been dismissed, even though they had generally organised independently of the unions. Faced with the question from audience as to whether the trade unions would also support a liberal-style transformation scenario, Yarashuk pointed out that he had been describing economic reforms and also privatisation as essential for years. This might not be typical for trade unions – but the situation in Belarus was also atypical, with a state as „exploiter of its own workers“. Society did not need state employees „who are not responsible for anything“ as economic leaders but rather entrepreneurs who stood up for their companies and employees.

Referring to her experience in the GDR, **Klara Geywitz** (Deputy Federal Chairperson of the SPD) pointed out that especially in countries without a long democratic tradition, it was often difficult to convince people to intervene in public affairs. However, it was precisely the participation of the people in all areas at grass-root level that was decisive – „democracy needs democrats“ (Friedrich Ebert). Geywitz saw a major challenge in activating the current potential for civil society in the longer term, as a foundation for a permanently open society. One should „not leave politics to the politicians“, she stressed, also in remembrance of the consequences of 1989: after the very broad mass movement that brought down the GDR system, a retreat into the private sphere, into passivity, had taken place all too quickly again when the first problems of the transformation process became visible. Economic difficulties were blamed on the new democratic structures and such an equation was also to be expected in Belarus from the defenders of the authoritarian structures. Therefore, the transformation had to be cushioned economically also by international aid.

In the further deliberations, it was discussed whether, at least at the local level, there was some willingness on the part of official bodies to cooperate with civil society initiatives. According to Karatkevich, there was mention of such „dialogues“ on the internet, but only people from their own ranks were invited, „the state only talks with itself“. According to Karach, local government officials were often in a certain dilemma, because on the one hand they (had to) side with the government but at the same time they saw the rapid change in the situation and it was „no fun“ to become the „butt of hate“ for the population. This was noticeable particularly in smaller towns. Therefore, there was both: ever stronger repressions but also a certain accommodation and understanding by individual state officials. However, such local success stories were not made public explicitly in order not to endanger existing processes.

## CLOSING DISCUSSION: PERSPECTIVES FOR BELARUS

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During the two days of the conference, the question of the future in Belarus was already resonating in most of the contributions, and the final discussion tried to point out some perspectives. Moderator **Markus Meckel** identified the massive violence as a major difference to the experience of the predominantly peaceful revolution in the GDR and asked about the hopes of the people: What moves them to persevere and how is this decentralised network of protests organised? **Veranika Tsapkala** (Foundation „Belarus of the Future“), who herself is one of the best-known faces of the protest movement, confirmed that there were indeed no real leaders, especially since prominent people either ended up in prison or had to go into exile. However, decentralised leaders can be found everywhere, for example in companies or local groups; that was where „the Belarusian nation is born“.

According to **Andrey Dzmitriyev** (Citizens' Movement „Tell the Truth“), Lukashenka's behaviour provided people with arguments every week to persevere, to take to the streets for a country where they can vote, where no one is arbitrarily mistreated, where they see a future. The main damage done by the regime, he observed, was the destruction of the national consensus, Lukashenka had created a division. But without fundamental trust between the different groups in society, no new constitution could be drafted. The first step, he said, had to come from the regime, i.e. an end to violence and the release of political prisoners. At the moment, however, Lukashenka's strategy apparently continued to be to first crush the protests (also with Russia's support) and then to start a kind of „dialogue“ with people he favoured.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her advisor for international relations **Franak Vyachorka** are also campaigning for new elections. The dialogue was not getting off the ground because the interests of both sides were opposed; the population was fighting for the „moment of change“ and was partly in prison for it; the powerful and their supporters wanted to maintain the status quo. Vyachorka is working on a model of how new elections can be held and at the same time how those who belong to the old nomenclature and economic elite can find a place in the new Belarus. Of course, this was not about an amnesty for criminal offences. Representatives of the current regime had to be convinced that a dialogue – also with the Coordination Council – to prepare free elections was the only solution. Meckel pointed to European support and the awarding of the Sakharov Prize to three opposition representatives, combined with the question of how international pressure on Lukashenka could be increased further. Vyachorka confirmed that political meetings of the opposition with high-ranking foreign representatives were very important, as they delegitimised Lukashenka and at the same time represented a form of recognition of the civic movement. In addition, he mentioned three areas of possible assistance: First, through promises of future financial support („Marshall Plan“) during the difficult period of transition, including for small businesses,

media or lawyers, for example. Secondly, through increased sanctions, withdrawal of diplomats, and generally increased pressure not only on Lukashenka but also on his direct environment, i.e. the elites, who were always counting on a return to the conditions before the election. And thirdly, through legal means; the Belarusian legal system was at its lowest ebb, cases of abuse of power had to be brought before international courts in order to restore a sense of justice to the people. The International Criminal Court in The Hague only accepted cases from states that had ratified it, but perhaps cooperation with other institutions would be conceivable, for example the European Court of Justice. A step could also be to classify notorious special forces like OMON or GUBAZIK as terrorist organisations.

**Michael Georg Link** (Member of the Bundestag, FDP), as Vice-Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, affirmed that this organisation could also support the documentation of human rights violations for future international prosecution. Belarus, as a member of the OSCE, had obligations that had clearly been broken in several respects. All the organisation's tools for mediation were rejected by Lukashenka and Russia, although they were developed for precisely such stalemates, in which the state leadership rejected any negotiation or only proposed a controlled „vertical“ dialogue without involving the protesters. The involvement of international organisations was urgently needed. For example, the ODIHR could help with legislation and be available to observe elections, and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe could accompany a possible path towards institutional reforms. **Mark Hauptmann** (Member of the Bundestag, CDU) as Chair of the German-Belarusian Parliamentary Group in the German Bundestag reported on contacts with Libereco, in this context more than 50 German MPs had taken on sponsorship for political prisoners in Belarus. The initiative for strategic economic cooperation launched at the beginning of 2020, on the other hand, had been suspended since the August elections but could be resumed with a future democratic Belarus.

**Katsyaryna Shmatsina** (Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies) acknowledged that to outsiders it may seem that the protests were not very dynamic and produced few concrete results. But the dissolution of the established authoritarian power would take time. In response to Meckel's doubts about how long Russia would continue to stand by idly, Shmatsina stressed that the apparent support for Lukashenka was only superficial; Moscow's main concern was to maintain good relations with the democratic forces so as not to „lose“ a future Belarus to the West. According to **Dirk Schuebel** (Head of the European Union Representation in Belarus), the virtual absence of EU flags at the protests showed that this was not a movement with a geopolitical background, even if Lukashenka or Russia sometimes assumed that it was controlled by the West. Europe could offer itself as a mediator, but the possibilities of exerting economic pressure were limited, as the Union had deliberately provided Belarus under Lukashenka with little financial support in the past.

In view of the dramatic situation on the ground, Meckel brought up the possibility of the Federal Republic of Germany taking in injured people. Hauptmann affirmed that the Bundestag was willing to do so but that aid programmes needed a partner on the ground, and that was traditionally the government and could hardly be organised with civil society alone. Meckel, however, reminded the audience that despite these difficulties, other European states were already taking in injured people. Tsapkala emphasised not only medical support but also media attention: the world had to learn as much as possible about the human rights violations in Belarus. The Belarusian media itself has also completely restructured itself in recent months. Vyachorka referred in particular to Telegram as the main platform, where both large channels such as NEXTA and local chats had gained great importance. In the last few months, citizen journalism had become vital for the survival of Belarusian media.

The audience asked about the concrete benefit of sanctions. According to Shmatsina, sanctions could be useful, as long as they targeted Lukashenka's direct supporters and accomplices and the population did not get the impression that their own well-being would be affected. Asked about concrete forecasts for the future, Dzmitriyev expressed the hope that three free elections would take place in 2021: the election of a new president as well as parliamentary and local elections. He said it was important to ensure that a future parliament would truly represent the people. Because even if Lukashenka stepped down, other forces – inspired from Russia, for example – could try to come to power: „If we are not prepared for these three elections, we may win the revolution and still lose the future.“ Markus Meckel concluded by stressing the importance of the upcoming elections, pointing to the indispensable acceptance of diversity in a democracy – because despite all the current unity against the authoritarian system and the desire for freedom and self-determination, there would also be conflicts to be resolved within the differentiated society in the future.

## NON-PUBLIC ROUND TABLE

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Following the public part of the conference, a two-hour internal exchange took place, moderated by **Alice Bota** (Moscow correspondent of DIE ZEIT). Initially, the Belarusian participants were asked for first-hand reports and invited to discuss among themselves, after which there was an opportunity for an exchange with German and European players.