

EU Visa Maze for Belarusians

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Belarus Hosts Another EU

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Free Elections for 3 Billion Euros?

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The foreign ministers came to encourage Belarus to come closer to the European Union and said in the next three the EU could offer up to 3 billion Euros in aid to Belarus if its presidential vote on December 19 is free and fair.

Unsurprisingly, President Lukashenka promised that the vote would be fair, reassuring Westerwelle and Sikorski that the “vote legitimacy is more important to us now than to anybody else.” It surely is, especially since it is so easy to obtain. The upcoming election is an excellent opportunity for the leader to get a pat on the back by playing by the EU rules. After all, the ‘man of the people’ will be running against 10 (!) opposition candidates who have no access to the media and use whatever resources they scrape together to bicker with each other.

Rapprochement with the EU could indeed bring tangible benefits for the country and its people. Economic cooperation would help increase living standards, help rebuild the country’s

infrastructure, and allow Belarusians to travel to Western Europe more easily.

However, the need to abide by liberal democratic norms would impose high costs on the authoritarian regime in Belarus. In fact, history shows that a regime that ventures a partial political opening risks a dramatic rise in citizens' demands and expectations. Coupled with the effects of economic and technological developments, a slight relaxation of Minsk's grip on the Belarusian society could substantially increase the resources available to the political opposition and empower the people to mobilize against repression.

Interestingly, in the opinion [poll](#) issued by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI) this fall, nearly 40 percent of the 1,527 respondents said Belarus should be led by a president following pro-EU policy and almost 60 percent favored a leader who supports a market economy.