

Address by Minister Radosław Sikorski
at the opening of the seminar

Privatisation and private enterprise in Belarus
- ***Scope of international assistance***

Warsaw, Łazienki Krolewskie, 16 April, 2012

Commissioner,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Every man is born free and is endowed with inalienable rights – the right to freely determine his life; to elect his government; to possess private property.

When these rights are taken away from him – he expresses his opposition and fights for their restoration.

We, the Poles, who – like Belarusians today – have tasted the bitterness of bondage, are carefully listening to the voice of the Belarusian civil society.

This was the reason why – half a year ago, at the Eastern Partnership Summit – Prime Minister Donald Tusk called for the strengthening of the policy addressed to those Belarusians who want a change for the better, who want to reform their country.

The reflection that this call triggered led to the development of the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus. This programme would not have been launched were it not for Commissioner Füle, and all those of us who are not indifferent to the fate of Belarus wish to thank the Commissioner for his involvement.

The Dialogue was launched three weeks ago in Brussels. It will be continued in Minsk and in many capitals across the European Union.

The seminar in Warsaw, the first in the series, aims – like other planned conferences – to develop sector-specific recommendations for the future transformation of the Belarusian state.

Yet, we must all bear in mind that the push for reform must be initiated and driven by the Belarusian people themselves. Only then will it yield positive results.

We do not intend to force anything on you, but both Poland and the European Union are capable and willing to help you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not think there is anyone here who would question the need to modernise Belarus. Our eastern neighbour ranks 65th in the UN Human Development Index. In comparison, Estonia, once also under Moscow's domination, ranks 34th. In its economic freedom ranking, Freedom House placed Belarus on the penultimate, 42nd position among European states.

Economic reforms in Belarus are at a standstill, which is plain for anyone to see. The country is hit by price hikes, job prospects for young people are dim – especially if they choose not to build their careers at the cost of subordination and corruptive practices, and the inflow of foreign investments is marginal.

State capitalism breeds corruption, inefficiency and wastefulness. It provides financial comfort to the ruling class, while thinning out citizens' wallets.

A modern state cannot function along the same lines as a kolkhoz. "Manual control" of the economy sooner or later leads to a serious crisis, especially if the correlation of forces in the world is unpropitious.

Economic freedom fosters a country's development. But this freedom needs the rule of law and the protection of private ownership. Only a democratic system can fully guarantee such protection.

At the same time, democracy is to politics what the free market is to the economy. Both are needed to better gauge the preferences of citizens and – consequently – to allocate resources more rationally.

The result is plain to see: **the level of economic development in democratic countries is, as a rule, higher than in undemocratic ones.**

Therefore, support for privatisation reforms and the development of private enterprise is an important element of systemic transformation. You will have an opportunity to hear more about this subject from the most competent person in this field, the author of the reforms that transformed Poland into a market economy, Professor Leszek Balcerowicz.

Why is Poland, yet again, putting forward an initiative addressed to Belarus, supported in its efforts by the entire European Union?

Poland is not only Belarus's neighbour, it is also its ally. We are bound together by many centuries of common history. Our cultures have penetrated each other. Our languages are similar. There are Poles living east of the Bug river as well as Belarusians living in our country.

Poland is also the homeland of Solidarity. We treat this heritage as an obligation. We can and should share our experiences in democratising and modernising our country. We wish to do so within the framework of the European Union. We have proven this by launching the Eastern Partnership, soon to be followed by the European Endowment for Democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We want to eliminate barriers between Poland and Belarus. We are making the European Union's external border as untroublesome as possible for Belarusian citizens, and as tightly controlled as possible for the people behind the persecutions.

Poland issues more than half of all Schengen visas in Belarus. Last year we doubled that number. The EU foreign ministers last month decided to pursue to the maximum extent the

possibilities provided for by the Schengen visa code and to apply the most friendly interpretation of its regulations to Belarusian citizens with the intention of issuing even more visas, but also to make them less expensive – and sometimes even free of charge. Poland has been handing out national visas free of charge for over a year now.

The problem of queues in front of Polish consular offices still exists. There is nothing more we can do in this regard. We have requested that the Belarusian side permit us to accredit additional consular officers. So far, to no avail.

We are also willing to cooperate with the Belarusians to make our common border no longer a barrier for many Belarusian citizens. I am referring here to local border traffic. We signed an agreement two years ago. **Poland has complied with all the procedures.** Were it not for the lack of consent on the part of Minsk, local border traffic would have been a reality a long time ago.

Over a million Belarusians, including inhabitants of large cities like Grodno and Brest, could be freely crossing the border with Poland and staying in the border area without obstacle or additional formalities.

This step would accommodate mutual social expectations, but **the free movement of persons leads to a free movement of ideas...**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One can argue over many things in politics. Most disputes can be settled by way of dialogue between states, but there is no compromise – and indeed there will never be any compromise – over such fundamental issues as human rights violations.

We were forced to resort to restrictive measures in order to defend these rights. We could not remain passive and indifferent to the suffering of the prisoners of conscience and their families.

I would like to express our special solidarity with all those who are still in prison, their families and friends. I welcome the release of presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau and Dmitri Bondarenko, and once again emphasize that we shall not stop in our efforts demanding release of all political prisoners.

Dear Belarusian friends,

Rest assured that Poland and Europe are friends of Belarus.

We see your European aspirations and we reciprocate them.

May this seminar be a harbinger of deeper dialogue between the European Union and Belarus.

Our efforts are guided by one common objective: a democratic Belarus.