

Opening speech by
Giedrė Purvaneckienė, President of the Baltic Assembly,
at the Seminar of the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council
“Belarus and the Eastern Partnership after the election in Belarus”
Vilnius, 7 December 2015

Dear Colleagues,

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome the participants of the seminar here in the Constitution Hall of the Seimas.

I believe it is symbolic that we have gathered here in the Constitution Hall which serves as a powerful testimony to the commitment of the Lithuanian nation, as well as of all the Baltic nations, to the European values, i.e. democracy, the rule of law and civil society. The Constitution Hall represents the choice of the Lithuanian nation, as well as of other Baltic nations, to follow the path towards the European and transatlantic families.

Dear Colleagues,

It was not so long ago that we witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lifting of the Iron Curtain. Europe was given a chance to shape a different future, and we were given a chance to dream about an undivided and free, democratic and dynamic, safe and secure Europe. We entered the post-Cold War era of peace, stability and prosperity. The Baltic States, the Visegrad countries, Belarus and many other countries regained their independence. With the help and support of the Nordic, Benelux and other friendly countries, the Baltic States have embarked on the path towards the European and transatlantic families. For the nations of the Baltic States, this – sometimes very difficult – path has resulted in the EU and NATO membership. Unfortunately, the same happy-ending story cannot be told about Belarus.

The case of Belarus represents a great challenge not only to democracy promoters but also to scholars, since the country has been rather insensitive towards all the policies employed with regard to it. We are all aware of the preliminary findings and conclusions of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the Belarusian presidential election of 11 October 2015. The political and economic situation in Belarus is worrying the European countries.

Democracy and human rights have been given a priority in the EU's development of relations with Belarus. This is stated in the majority of the official documents and rhetorical addresses to Belarus. Nevertheless, it seems that Belarus represents one of the most difficult and reluctant cases for the EU in its efforts to succeed in bringing forth a democratic change. As the Belarusian civil society activist, Vintsuk Vyachorka, once put it, "Belarus represents a special case in the extensive practice of EU policies."

Dear Colleagues,

I believe that many politicians of the opposition are worried about the rapprochement of the European Union and the whole international community with Belarus. Allow me to share some thoughts with you as to why the international community, in the face of the CBSS, the EU or any other international organisation, is searching for ways to cooperate with Belarus:

- Firstly, there is a need to cope with common issues and threats to environmental security in cross-border regions.

In other words, we cannot protect the Baltic Sea if we do not have common environmental projects with Belarus, as we are all interconnected in terms of environment.

- Secondly, low-level politicisation of cooperation also contributes to the establishment of more intense and trustworthy relations, which might increase the chances of democratic socialisation. Through low-level cooperation, Europeans bring their basic values of democracy to Belarus.

The EU policies have been transformed from those that aim to externalise its normative rules for regulating public policy in each sector of political cooperation with Belarus to those that create new channels and procedural rules of bottom-up engagement within approximately 78 sectoral policies that could make public actors more inclined to choose transparent, accountable and participatory modes of governance. Functional cooperation, first and foremost, creates opportunities for democratisation and democratic socialisation. Public officials receive an opportunity to not only learn but also practice democratic governance in their every-day administrative routine.

Dear Colleagues,

Dialogue, openness and trust should be the key leitmotifs for this seminar. I do hope that our dialogue today will be open and based on mutual trust. On behalf of the Baltic Assembly, I would like to thank the Nordic Council for their contribution to the organisation of this seminar, and now I would like to give the floor to my Nordic colleague, Höskuldur Þórhallsson.