
Belarus-EU dialogue: Towards more pragmatism?

Description

The announcement to start visa liberalization dialogue with the EU was the most important result of the 2013 Eastern Partnership Summit for Belarus. This initiative could be seen as a pragmatic attempt to rebalance Belarus' alliance choices under a narrowing scope of opportunities.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, a common foreign policy launched in 2009, became the first multilateral framework for the EU to approach its post-Soviet neighbours. Both prior to the EaP implementation and up until today the policies of the EU towards Belarus can be characterized as “*comply with conditionality set by us to expect any progress in the relations*”, whereas the message of the Belarusian authorities in response could be described as “*focus on real spheres of cooperation and accept us as we are*”.



Eastern Partnership: five years without progress

Belarus has long been an outsider with regard to deepening bilateral relations with the EU, since already in 1997 “*the deteriorating political situation in Belarus*” caused the Council of the European Union not to conclude a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Minsk.[1] Brussels explains the limited scope of its cooperation with Belarus by “*the policies pursued by President Alexander Lukashenka's regime [which] prevent the EU from offering a full participation in the neighbourhood policy*”.[2] Thus the inclusion of Belarus into the EaP framework can be seen as a breakthrough, as it opened the way for the institutionalization of relations, at least at multilateral level.

The EU made all further endeavours to develop relations conditional upon Belarus's progress towards the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights. At the same time, presidential elections of December 2010 in Belarus and the repressive backlash that followed marked the lowest point in bilateral relations. Joint disagreement deepened after the Belarusian delegation left the second EaP summit in Warsaw in September 2011. In the meantime, the EU had re-imposed restrictive measures –a visa ban and assets freeze–on over 160 members of the leadership. From March 2012 onwards, the European Commission concentrated its efforts on a European Dialogue on Modernisation (EDM) with Belarusian society addressed towards the country's NGOs and political opposition –thereby excluding, as previously, regime representatives from this platform.

Thus, notwithstanding the implementation of the EaP, Belarus-EU relations are characterized by a limited dialogue dominated by mutual mistrust and political antagonism. On the one hand, the EU recognized the importance of Belarus as a partner but sticks with the principle of conditionality. On the other hand, Belarus's authorities tried to channel their vision of the EaP as a multi-speed and “*result-oriented cooperation framework [...] that should serve pragmatic interests of all partner states and the Wider Europe in general by fostering sustainable development, economic and social modernisation in this part of the continent*”.

”.[3] These approaches imply rather inflexible positions of both sides which merely keep the status quo in Belarus-EU relations that had existed prior to the EaP launch. Such a situation still provides a window of opportunities for the development of Belarus-EU cooperation in certain areas however.

In the shadow of Ukraine

The announcement by Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei to start dialogue with the EU on visa liberalization was the most important result of the last EaP Summit for Belarus. First, regardless of the reasons behind the authorities' reluctance to answer Brussels' invitation to negotiate earlier, the issue of visa liberalization is merely a technical, not a political issue. It requires expressed shared interest and thus depends on the political will of both parties. However, facilitating border-crossing between Belarus and the EU does open a window of opportunities. Second, for a number of years Belarus has been a world champion with regard to the number of Schengen visas issued per person.[4] At the same time, Belarusians pay for Schengen visas more (60 €) than citizens of other EaP countries or Russia (35 €). Third, a reciprocally more liberal visa regime for incoming guests could objectively boost Belarus's tourism industry. Hence, none of these coincides with the political controversies in Belarus-EU relations; they comply with the goals of the EaP on encouraging people-to-people contacts and reflect the pragmatic vision of the Belarusian authorities towards the EaP framework.

The general evaluation of the EaP progress “resembles a two-tier league where the “champions” who were about to initiate or sign the association agreement are delegated to the higher tier, while those lacking it – to the second tier”.[5] This complies with the “more for more” principle announced in May 2011 by the revised version of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Belarus, the only EaP country not specifically mentioned in the Programme of the 2013 Lithuanian Presidency of the EU Council, was turned into an outsider in the second-tier. With the EU focusing on the first-tier states, notably Ukraine, Belarus has received only marginal attention in Vilnius. Therefore, against this political background, U.Makei's “constructive” message had little chance to attract much public attention.

Pragmatism revisited

In fact, Belarus has been an outcast of the EaP all along. At the same time, the authorities steadily repeated their country's readiness to collaborate with the EU within the framework of the EaP. Going further, Uladzimir Makei recently urged the EU to abandon conditionality and “*its one-size-fits-all approach to the partner states*”.[6]

This statement illustrates Belarus's diplomatic attempts at fostering pragmatism in relations with the EU. First, against the background of the Ukrainian crisis the Belarusian authorities attempt to stress the EU's interest in “*a sovereign, independent, and whole Belarus that makes its contribution to maintaining stability and security in Europe*”.[7] Second, U.Makei emphasized the unattractiveness for Belarus of a rapprochement under the aegis of the EaP, in comparison with what other partners can obtain via Association Agreements. Third, the Belarusian authorities try to emphasize the need for the EU to develop a long-term cooperation strategy, breaking from the current policy which “*can be described as ad hoc actions that were at best planned for the short term*”.[8] Fourth, they stress the need for a more pragmatic approach by mentioning the economic importance of the EU as Belarus' second-largest trading partner, after Russia.

The Belarusian authorities obviously repeat their earlier rhetoric, attempting to “de-politicize” the country's bilateral relations with the EU, which they see as the most rational way to break the current

deadlock –thus ignoring the EU’s conditioning of normalisation of relations to the prior release and rehabilitation of political prisoners. What is new, however, is that Minsk invoke the rhetoric of regional stability, waiving the prospect of a (Russian) threat against Belarus’s sovereignty and territorial integrity to force the EU to swap a values-based approach for a more pragmatic *Realpolitik*-based one.

The 2014 ice hockey World Championship held in Minsk in May 2014 seems very important for that purpose. On the one hand, the authorities will obviously try to make the event a smaller copy of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. On the other hand, an apparent mercantilism of the Belarusian authorities, embodied in a temporary visa-free regime during the competition, appears as a good will gesture meant to open a window of opportunities, which could bear fruits in a mid-term perspective. In fact, the Championship provides Belarus with a possibility to present its national culture to foreigners under a better light. Largely unknown, or perceived as a part of the so-called *Russosphere*, it is national culture that serves as the main identity marker of Belarusian distinctiveness. Hosting this event could provide grounds for foreigners to revise their perception of Belarus, which is now largely conditioned by the dichotomy and antagonism between the regime and political opposition/civic society, a scheme which leaves no room for the Belarusian *people* as such. Either way, this event could help rediscover the least known European country and thus eliminate at least part of the stereotypes about it.

All EaP developments prior to the Summit in Vilnius and its outcomes with regard to Belarus illustrate the stability of the current *status quo* in the Belarus-EU relations. However, against the background of the developments in Ukraine and short-sightedness of the ultimatum urging the EaP countries to make an “either-or” choice between the EU and Russia, the recent shifts in Belarusian foreign policy rhetoric towards more mercantilism and good marketing of the country as a tourist and investment destination signal the regime’s attempts to rebalance Belarus’ alliance choices within the available scope of opportunities. The future will tell whether the regime is ready to make concessions for that purpose.

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Picture : Volat, the mascot of the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship, in front of the Belarusian State Circus in Minsk. Photo: Anaïs Marin, April 2014.

[Translation in French](#)

* Project research associate at the European Centre for Minority Issues (www.ecmi.de) and deputy editor of *Belarusian Review* (thepointjournal.com).

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Auteur-article : Hanna VASILEVICH*