

Can EU-Belarusian Relations Be Reset?

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It is common to portray the European Union (and the United States) as unwaveringly in support of isolating Belarus. The reality is somewhat different. Over the last two decades, EU-Belarusian relations have been cyclical. In the most notable cycle, a cooling in the first half of the 2000s was followed by a rapprochement that peaked over 2008-2010, when the EU had high expectations of successful engagement and offered Belarus generous financial assistance. This optimism did not survive the wave of political repressions that followed Belarus' 2010 presidential election, however, when the West sanctioned 200 officials and several companies (though the economic effects of the sanctions were negligible and probably intentionally so).

Since then, a new cycle has begun (see **Table 1**). Belarus is a full-fledged member of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, designed to boost engagement with its post-Soviet neighbors. From the start of 2013, the EU undertook attempts to achieve a new normalization with Belarus in the context of Lithuania's EU presidency (a six-month revolving post) and the Vilnius EaP summit. The Ukraine conflict has further boosted Brussels' interest in stepping up its interaction with Minsk, while paying purposefully less attention to the country's domestic situation.

Table 1. Belarus Foreign Policy Index

	1/11	1/12	4/12	6/12	3/13	6/13	2/14	4/14	5/14	6/14	1/15	2/15	3/15
Russia	20	33	26	31	50	37	24	33	22	14	16	11	28
EU	-15	-7	-7	0	16	22	11	24	22	23	22	23	20

Source: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, www.belinstitute.eu

Table 1. Note 1: The Index provides +/- indicators. It is compiled on the basis of "events" (high-level meetings, political statements, media campaigns etc.). In addition to Russia and the EU, in the source scores are provided for China, Ukraine, and developing countries. The Index is issued bimonthly; 1/12 in the table refers to January-February 2012, etc., with the exception of 1/11, which covers January-March 2011.

Table 1. Note 2: It follows from the Index that the normalization in EU-Belarusian relations has been going on for several years. In fall 2014–spring 2015 this relationship was even indexed more positively than the Belarusian-Russian one, but by summer 2015 the status quo was restored.

The EU's rediscovered "pragmatism" is a reaction to the changing situation." First, it is evident that in light of Moscow's actions in Ukraine the Belarusian leadership has become concerned about the sovereignty of its country and is seeking some political distance from Russia. Second, the Russian economic slowdown and shrinking of business opportunities in the post-Soviet space have increased Belarus' need to secure access to international finance.

However, this is no guarantee that Minsk will respond in ways that are to the EU's liking, either by way of internal liberalization or a shift in its foreign policy balance. If the EU moves away from its earlier, normative approach toward Belarus, making unilateral concessions on issues of human rights and political freedoms, it risks legitimizing the results of the approaching October 2015 presidential election—a preordained sixth-term victory for incumbent Alexander Lukashenko. This will be a clear diplomatic success for Minsk. In the end, the EU will be able to speak about a normalization in relations, but differences on issues of principle will continually surface and the EU will find it difficult to defend its position.

What Drives the EU's Renewed Engagement

For a country that is allegedly isolated, Belarus demonstrates an exceptionally intensive high-level dialogue with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the rotating EU presidency (in the first half of 2015 held by neighboring Latvia), and individual EU member states. The EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, has already gone to Minsk twice this year, in April and June. Meetings are regularly held not only with Belarusian diplomats but with Lukashenko himself, who happens to be banned from entering the EU. This ought to be an awkward situation, but neither Brussels nor Minsk has chosen to see it as embarrassing in any way. The EU-Belarus agenda includes issues of cooperation within the EaP, bilateral visa liberalization, and aspects of Belarusian modernization.

The motivation behind the new EU engagement with Belarus is complex. At least four drivers can be identified. The first is geostrategic. As Charles Grant from the London-based Center for European Reform has [observed](#), "the EU's institutions and key governments are in broad agreement that they should seek closer links to Belarus, with a view to lessening its dependence on Russia." Regardless of whether or not this is attainable, there is a sense within the EU that Minsk should be rewarded for "its role in the Ukraine peace process" or, more accurately perhaps, for its refusal to fully follow Russia's lead (Minsk was the site of two rounds of talks that produced the current cease-fire agreements and plans for a settlement of the conflict).

The second driver stems from EU frustration with the results of its previous value-oriented approach, which failed to achieve political liberalization. The political opposition in Belarus is weaker than ever. The position of the ruling regime is stable,

and the October elections promise to be a mere formality. In EU circles, the way out of this impasse is engagement with civil society but *also* with the regime. The idea is that by engaging the Belarusian state bureaucracy, a gradual socialization and increasing compatibility with Europe in at least a technocratic sense can be achieved.

The third driver is the stagnating EaP. The EU is currently reviewing its Neighborhood Policy, which has been a disappointment on both the EU's southern and eastern periphery. Belarus is far from being a "success story" of the policy, but as a basis for reporting at least some "progress," it has potential. At the same time, the term "co-ownership" is now brought up as a key concept for making the EU's partnerships more effective; this implies a less demanding approach by the EU and more attention given to the wishes of its partners.

Finally, though perhaps least importantly for now, is the desire to find an "understanding" with Belarus (and Kazakhstan) in the event that the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) begin a dialogue on trade liberalization. The idea of launching such a dialogue was promoted in 2014 as a way to reach out to Russia, which had been suggesting it for some time. It is also viewed as a way to ease tensions regarding Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU. This initiative has been shelved in recent months, but if it makes a comeback Russia's partners are expected to adopt a more constructive approach than Moscow, which can exert a positive impact on the entire endeavor.

Wishful Thinking Thus Far...and for the Foreseeable Future

EU overtures to Minsk have brought little tangible results. There is no indication that any kind of political liberalization is forthcoming. The 2015 election campaign has been arguably even less free than the 2010 or 2006 campaigns. Nikolai Statkevich, a candidate in 2010 and currently the most popular opposition politician, was banned from participating in the race since he was serving prison time for organizing "mass disorder." In June 2015, the International Federation for Human Rights issued a statement about the worsening situation of political prisoners in Belarus. Statkevich, together with five other political prisoners, was eventually granted a presidential pardon in August but only after candidate registration was officially complete. No legal rehabilitation of the political prisoners, which was an original demand of the EU, followed. Overall, the pardon only emphasized the lack of rule of law in the country.

In the diplomatic field, Minsk has also not taken any actions out of character. At the Riga EaP summit in May 2015, for instance, Belarus (and Armenia) refused to condemn the annexation of Crimea, leaving meaningless on this point the joint declaration of the summit, which simply reiterated all participants' past public positions.

In its diplomatic pronouncements, the Belarusian leadership continues to emphasize that Russia remains the country's main strategic partner and that all allegations about a possible re-balancing of Belarus' foreign policy are mistaken. Consequently, Minsk tries to reassure Moscow that Belarus' participation in the EaP is not at the expense of its relations with Russia. In an April 2015 address to the nation, Lukashenko accused of "wishful thinking" those Westerners who had rushed to interpret his absence at the Victory Day military parade in Moscow as a sign of conflict with Moscow and solidarity with the West. He went on to call any such interpretation "foolishness and stupidity."

Perhaps the best evidence that no major turns are to be expected in Belarusian policy can be found in the behavior of Moscow, which remains calm and benevolent toward Minsk. Besides the occasional critical publication in the state-controlled media, very little would suggest that Moscow has any concerns. Even the critical pieces are a far cry from the anti-Lukashenko campaign that was evident in Russia on the eve of the 2010 presidential election. On the contrary, it is clear that Moscow has accepted Minsk's "autonomy" on the Ukrainian question, just as after 2008 the Kremlin acquiesced to Belarus' differing position on Georgia. A May visit to Moscow by Lukashenko to participate in the summits of the CIS and the EEU ran smoothly. In July, Lukashenko also attended summits in Russia of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Belarus was also granted observer status in the latter, something it had been seeking since 2005.

One explanation for Moscow's tranquility may be its assessment that Belarus' dependence on Russia and integration into Russian-led mechanisms have already passed beyond the critical point. On fundamental foreign policy decisions, Minsk has little freedom.

Belarus is, of course, not a neutral country but rather Russia's closest formal political and military ally. The Russian-Belarusian bilateral Union State was formed in 1999 and, unlike the EEU, is supposed to lead not only to economic but also close and institutionalized political integration. In reality, the Union State has stagnated, but defense cooperation at least remains active. The two countries operate a joint air defense system and regularly conduct large-scale exercises. Russia has military installations in Belarus and plans to establish an air force base. Public discussion of the possibility that Russia could use Belarusian territory against Ukraine—however provocative and unwelcome such discussion may be in Minsk—is one indication of a certain perceived loss of Belarusian sovereignty.

Belarus also retains a fundamental economic dependence on Russia. As a member of the EEU, Belarus does not have full trade sovereignty, though in practice it can circumvent certain of its rules. Bilaterally, annual energy subsidies from Russia reach up to 15 percent of the country's GDP. On top of that is Russia's considerable macroeconomic assistance. Andrei Suzdaltsev of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow has

[estimated](#) that since the end of the 1990s Russia has provided Belarus with approximately \$50 billion in loans, which are usually then restructured, refinanced, or written off. In July 2015, the Russian government decided to provide Belarus with yet another credit, this time of \$760 million. It goes without saying that the EU is both unwilling and unable to replace Moscow in this capacity.

Besides such material factors, the fear of internal political liberalization unites leaders in Moscow and Minsk above all. Since the West is viewed as strategically interested in promoting liberalization (and even regime change), there can be little trust in EU-Belarusian relations.

Finally, Moscow enjoys significant soft power among the Belarusian population, which still uses Russian media as the main source of news. [According](#) to a June 2015 opinion poll by the reputable Vilnius-based Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 62 percent of respondents considered Russia's annexation of Crimea as a "restoration of historical justice," whereas only 22 percent thought this was an "imperialist takeover; an occupation." Although 40 percent of respondents believed Belarus needed to seek rapprochement with the EU (28 percent were against), when faced with an "either-or" question about a hypothetical referendum on integration with either the EU or Russia, only 31 percent chose the former while 51 percent chose the latter.

Conclusion

The only way to really reset EU-Belarusian relations would be for Minsk to launch a comprehensive set of economic and political reforms. Unless this happens, EU-Belarus interaction will be technocratic and focused only on interpretations of the outcome of this or that "consultation" or "dialogue." The irony is that this may be sufficient for Minsk, especially if it leads to a gradual lifting of sanctions and brings in foreign investment and technology in exchange for cosmetic internal changes at best. This, however, would seriously undermine the reputation of the EU as an allegedly value-driven foreign policy actor.

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