

The Rapprochement between Belarus and the European Union

How Serious Is It?

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In June 2009, a crisis developed in Russian-Belarusian relations, triggered by the Belarusian leadership's refusal to accept payment in rubles of a promised \$500 million Russian credit. It was exacerbated by harsh exchanges between Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko and Russian finance minister Aleksei Kudrin. Within weeks, Russia introduced a milk and dairy embargo against Belarus, while Gazprom requested the payment of a \$230 million gas debt that it claimed Belarus had incurred in the first part of the year. Belarus reciprocated by indicating a readiness to introduce customs controls on the Russian border and refusing to take part in a summit of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (or assume the organization's rotating chairmanship as scheduled). The level of acrimony between the two states was so high that an unnamed source in the Russian presidential administration told the Russian daily *Kommersant* that "it looks like someone is simply tired of being president" of Belarus.

The deterioration of Russian-Belarusian relations, and even the use of personally offensive rhetoric, is not new. This time, however, the situation is qualitatively different as Belarus is no longer dealing with Russia on a purely bilateral basis. The June 2009 crisis is a consequence of a shift in Belarus' foreign policy orientation, specifically a rapprochement with the European Union. The crisis followed months of high-level contacts between Minsk and EU capitals, the accession of Belarus to the EU's Eastern

Partnership initiative, and diplomatic preparations for restoring Belarus' status as a special invitee in the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly.

The EU's decision to extend a hand to Belarus might be criticized as premature. The liberalization of the country's political regime has yet to even begin. What opportunity, then, does Brussels see in Belarus, and why does it want to invest its political capital there? Finally, how promising is the EU's policy of engagement?

Why Belarus Is Opening

The change in the EU's position has been precipitated, first, by a perceived opening within Belarus. Even with no political liberalization, Minsk has appeared ready to pursue a more balanced foreign policy in order to enlarge its space to maneuver between Russia and the West.

The main factor behind this foreign policy shift is the increasingly complicated character of Belarus' relations with Russia. First and foremost, Minsk has been concerned with the ongoing "marketization" of Russian foreign economic policy. Although subsidies may still be flowing, the era of "gas for kisses" is over; Russia cannot be expected to provide economic support to its neighbors in exchange for pledges of geopolitical loyalty. In early 2007, Belarus had to concede important elements of its gas transportation infrastructure to Russia to secure preferential energy prices. Belarus can also no longer retain all the profit of refining and exporting oil products made of Russian crude, which it was previously allowed to import tax-free. When Russia's Baltic Pipeline System-2 (BTS-2) to the Gulf of Finland is complete (probably in 2011 or 2012), Belarus will lose its position as an important transit country for Russian oil. After the incomes from oil transit diminish, it will be more difficult for the Belarusian administration to resist the pressure of the Russian companies seeking to acquire assets in the country.

The current global financial crisis further complicates the situation. Even without protectionist measures to help local producers, the Russian market is unable to absorb as many Belarusian exports as before. A constricted Russian market dictates the need for Belarus to diversify its exports, find new markets, and even join the World Trade Organization.

Moreover, Belarus is as disquieted as its neighbors by Russia's new assertiveness. Minsk did not enjoy being singled out as the member of the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States most expected to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In general, Minsk is uneasy with such public demonstrations of loyalty to Moscow, which complicate its relations with other global actors. This is true not only with regard to Western states and institutions but also China, for example, which retains a principled position in favor of the territorial integrity of states.

Meanwhile, Belarus is undergoing a complex and poorly understood internal evolution. As Belarus approaches its eighteenth year of independence, its post-Soviet self-identification is presumably weakening. While it may be premature to identify the rise of a European identity in its stead, a feeling of distinctiveness from Russia is

gradually emerging, in part due to Lukashenko's own rhetoric praising Belarusian sovereignty.

Also, as has happened elsewhere in Eastern Europe, bureaucratic and business elites who accumulate personal wealth are increasingly willing to trade certain exclusive administrative privileges for internationally-recognized status as the ruling elite of a "normal" state. A decade ago, Ukraine experienced a similar trend when its oligarchs realized that, while it is better to make money playing by post-Soviet rules, keeping that money is easier when European norms apply. Wealthy Belarusians now want to spend their money in Paris and Rome without worrying if they will find themselves struck down by a visa ban.

The strengthening of "technocrats" at the top of the Belarusian ruling pyramid, at the expense of the *siloviki* of the state's force structures, illustrates this point. Such symbols of the regime as KGB chairman Stepan Sukhorenko, praised by Lukashenko for his actions during the 2006 presidential election; Security Council secretary Viktor Sheiman, a loyal ally of Lukashenko even before his rise to power; and minister of internal affairs Vladimir Naumov, alleged to have been involved in the disappearance of prominent opposition politicians, have gradually been relieved from their posts. The regime in Minsk has recognized the need for a new face.

Finally, it should be acknowledged, Western sanctions have worked. Sanctions were imposed upon several of the most notorious figures of the Belarusian regime, as well as some enterprises, and were only lifted after the regime released political prisoners in 2008. While sanctions likely would not have produced such an outcome on their own, they do appear to have been a critical element in the mix of carrots and sticks. The Belarusian regime has to reckon with their possible reinstatement.

Why the EU Is Responding

The EU's "rediscovery" of Belarus has also had its own internal logic. From a bureaucratic perspective, the new Eastern Partnership is incomplete without Belarus. More importantly, the EU desperately needs a success in its Eastern policy, or at least the impression of success. Ukraine threatens to become the disappointment of the decade because of a failure to deliver anticipated reforms. Moldova remains on the brink of internal turmoil while in a diplomatic conflict with EU member Romania. Progress in the transformation of Belarus, in spite of these concerns, would be a real coup.

Valuing process generally more than results, the EU is also inclined to pursue policy engagement with Belarus more than isolation and sanctions. Able to point to the 2008 release of political prisoners as an indication of Belarus' readiness to make concessions, Brussels apparently believes it will be possible to negotiate further change.

The EU's willingness to deal with Lukashenko personally is probably the most questionable element of its approach. Some prominent European politicians have publicly declared that meetings with the Belarusian leader are unacceptable. A major embarrassment at the Eastern Partnership's May 2009 inaugural summit in Prague was avoided only because Lukashenko chose not to attend.

Still, the EU does not have any other comparable partner in Belarus. Lukashenko remains in control. Demonstrating his central role in Belarusian politics, Lukashenko ensured the regime's dominance in 2008 parliamentary elections, while ridding his entourage of several of its most hawkish figures. In addition, the split and disintegration of opposition forces has relegated them to the role of commentators rather than actors. Even within the diverse leadership of Eastern Partnership states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), Lukashenko no longer appears such an anomaly as to merit Belarus' exclusion.

How Likely Is Success?

Despite numerous motivations for EU-Belarusian engagement, a successful outcome is not guaranteed. Plans to liberalize Belarus through engagement with Minsk may well unravel.

First, Moscow will not observe with equanimity the rapprochement between the EU and Belarus. Its economic clout in Belarus remains strong; the resources the EU is prepared to allocate to regional projects are no match for what Russia can offer. In addition, some EU member states are unwilling to clash with Moscow on issues of their common neighborhood, treating the "strategic partnership" between the EU and Russia as the supreme regional priority. Overall, the EU is not a geopolitical actor; its capacity to play power games is limited.

More importantly, the EU bureaucracy may be too naïve and unprepared to deal with Lukashenko, who will not be easily outplayed. The president of Belarus is an extremely talented and experienced statesman, whose instincts and skills have kept him in power for fifteen years. He has also managed to receive enormous subsidies from Russia without yielding any meaningful political or economic benefits. He will challenge the EU, knowing full well that within this slow-moving entity the revision of any policy – including engagement with Belarus – is difficult and time-consuming. He may also embarrass Brussels by pointing out its "double standards," such as its seemingly less critical approach to Russia than to other regional partners.

Finally, the EU will have a problem reaching out beyond the regime. In its relations with Belarus, Brussels has been unwilling to utilize the promise of prospective EU membership, arguably its strongest foreign policy tool and one that could serve as the same driving force for transformation in Belarus as it has in Central Europe. Without it, there may be little popular demand for the Belarusian government to stay the course of rapprochement with Europe. Deprived of such leverage, the EU will be forced to rely on the continued goodwill of the regime. Measures such as visa facilitation could create positive momentum in Brussels' relationship with the populace, but such measures will not fully compensate for the lack of a long-term vision.

To promote transformation and liberalization in Belarus, the EU should implement a policy of conditionality and benchmarking. No significant assistance package should be provided without economic reform, especially in the energy sector. The EU should adhere to its demands for media freedom and respect for human rights and should not tolerate a return to the persecution of political activists. The March 2011 presidential election will be the right moment to assess whether or not such a policy has worked and

standards have improved, and to shift course accordingly. Contacts between reform-oriented groups from the state and civil society should also be promoted. In the end, however, all this will be insufficient if the EU fails to send a convincing message to the people of Belarus that their European aspirations, if and when they mature, will be recognized and that, like Ukraine and Moldova, Belarus has the chance, if it complies with the necessary criteria, to be fully integrated into Europe.

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