

## **Belarus and the Eastern Partnership: Challenges, obstacles, and expectations**

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## **Executive Summary**

Belarus and the European Union, as subjects of international relations, appeared almost simultaneously: in December, 1991 the Belovezh agreements were signed, and two months later in February, 1992 the Maastricht treaty heralded the creation of the European Union. Although 18 years is too short a period for historical generalizations, it can hardly be denied that during this time both the European Union and Belarus have gone far in their development. The EU, of course, has become one of the key global players. Belarus, in turn, having unexpectedly splintered off from the USSR (within which it had been the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) and gained independence, has made huge strides in taking advantage of its statehood. Eighteen years ago such swift development was hardly imagined in even the boldest forecasts. Thus, these mere eighteen years have meant very much, indeed.

On August 26, 2008 Poland and Sweden put forward an initiative to establish special relations with six countries of Eastern Europe: the ex-Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. They proposed a “27+6” formula for the Eastern Partnership Program.

This is a new idea and it offers a real opportunity to establish strategic and mutually beneficial cooperation. Taking into account the unique situation in Belarus, it need be recognized how important it is to offer effective approaches for the development of this program. Perceptions of the Eastern Partnership in Belarus and Europe remain quite different, and this creates barriers to cooperation. The main objective of the analysis presented here is to evaluate the current situation and predict the development of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) at the country level.

The EaP initiative is an original model for EU cooperation with its neighbors and it covers all possible spheres, concentrating on the most important and pressing challenges before the region. The EU should extend the Eastern Partnership, as it has shown its value as an innovative forum for deepening relations. In particular, the EaP should focus on reinforcing the role for civil society actors, and support the broadest possible channels for discussion.

EU policy toward Eastern Europe should advocate a change in the paradigm of Europe’s energy supply. This goal should also be reflected in the programs for technical assistance that the EU offers.

The issue of free travel for Belarusians to the EU has enormous significance for the shaping of social attitudes in Belarus that will be favourable from the EU's perspective. It is therefore necessary to meaningfully facilitate the travel of citizens of Belarus to the EU within the Schengen framework.

Lastly, in order to prevent the isolation of Belarus, investment in the growth of Belarus' pro-European elite is highly advisable.

## **The current policy priorities of Belarus in relations with the EU**

Diplomatic relations between Belarus and the EU were established in August, 1992. In November of that same year, during the official visit of a delegation of the European Communities, the intention was declared to conclude a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Belarus and EU that would replace the Agreement on trade and economic cooperation with the USSR signed on December 18, 1989.

The first summit of the Belarusian authorities and EU representatives took place in April, 1994 in Strasbourg. During the next summit in March 1995, which included the visit of Belarusian President Lukashenko to Brussels, the PCA between the European Union and Belarus was signed (March 6). On April 12, 1995 this agreement was unanimously ratified by the Belarusian parliament. The agreement created the necessary legal basis for an intensification of cooperation in all directions.

Until the PCA entered into force, trade and economic relations were developing according to the provisions of the Interim Agreement on trade, signed on March 26, 1996. During 1995 and the first half of 1996 the parliaments of eight members-states of the EU (Austria, Great Britain, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Sweden) ratified the agreement. The *Bundestag* of Germany also ratified the PCA, but failed in making appropriate notification.

A constitutional crisis developed in Belarus in the early autumn of 1996, and was followed by a November referendum, which was evaluated by EU observers as a fundamental breach of the basic principles stated in the preamble of the PCA. This resulted in suspension of further ratification among EU countries. Moreover, the European Parliament and other EU bodies adopted a number of resolutions on domestic developments in Belarus, the essence of which was non-acceptance of the results of the November 1996 referendum and the necessity of political changes in Belarus as a basic condition for developing cooperation. One key decision regarding the guidelines for further European Union policy towards Belarus was the conclusion of the EU Council on Belarus adopted on September 15, 1997, which limited political dialogue and froze the special decision procedure for ratification of the signed Agreement along with the entry into force of the Provisional Agreement on trade. It also significantly reduced the scope of the technical assistance within the TACIS and TEMPUS programs.

Nor did the conflict of the summer of 1998 concerning the residences of ambassadors (which resulted in the recall of all the ambassadors of EU countries from Belarus) serve as a means to promote any improvement of relations. In response, the EU Council made the decision to refuse to grant visas to Belarus' highest officials to the countries of the European Union. Attempts on the part of Belarus to normalize relations with Western countries were fruitless for a long time. Eventually the EU lifted visa restrictions for Belarusian officials and offered a formula for cooperation based on a policy of mutual step-by-step measures to normalize bilateral relations.

From 2000 to 2004 Belarus undertook efforts to improve relations with the EU. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs formulated a set of initiatives on “the concept of responsible neighbourhood with the EU”. This was likely intended as Belarus' own “step by step” approach, however there was no conceptual framework. Rather, there was simply a set of actions meant to partially replace the defective cooperation with the EU.

In the period from 2000 to 2008 the EU's need to seek out new approaches for relations with Belarus was obvious. This was best expressed in the step-by-step policy. Between 2004 and 2008 various formulas (namely: limited, selective cooperation/involvement) were offered, but all of them found expression in a step-by-step policy. Following its visit to Belarus, the “European Troika” (EU, OSCE, CE) formulated four basic criteria, the fulfillment of which is the basis for renewing full-scale Belarus-EU relations. None of the parliamentary elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008 in Belarus were recognized by Europe as democratic and thus did not offer a basis for promoting cooperation.

On the eve of the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the Council of the European Union accepted the special document “EU policy options on Belarus”, which defined the conditions and opportunities for the development of cooperation with Belarus. However those elections were appraised by the EU countries as failing to meet OSCE standards. According to the EU, Belarus' elections “had not brought the country closer to European democracy”. Nevertheless, the statements of representatives of European structures were less critical than usual, and differed from the statements made by the US. Basically, after the 2006 elections the EU was faced with having to adopt a policy of even more rigid isolationism – indeed, this is precisely what certain politicians in the West and some representatives of the Belarusian democratic

opposition called for. But a significant number of political forces and institutes in Europe stressed that any such policy held little promise and did not correspond to the interests of Europe – nor to that of Belarusian citizens.

The European Commission launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in March 2003. Initially, Belarus welcomed the European Neighbourhood Policy concept and suggested specific areas for cooperation – without, however, responding to the basic democratic requirements.

On November 21, 2006, the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, tabled a document setting out “What the EU could bring to Belarus”, were Belarus to engage in democratization and respect human rights and the rule of law. It contained concrete examples of how the people of Belarus could gain from a rapprochement with the EU within the framework of the ENP. However, because of the current political conditions, it has not been possible for the EU to offer Belarus the full advantages of the ENP, which are already being enjoyed by other countries in the region (Ukraine, Moldova).

The Council of the European Union’s Conclusions from October 2008 and November 2009 opened up new possibilities for dialogue and more active cooperation between the EU and Belarus and reaffirmed the readiness of the EU to deepen its relations with Belarus in light of further developments there towards democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Subject to progress in these areas, the Council stands ready to take steps towards upgrading relations with Belarus. Finally, after lengthy political discussions Belarus was invited in 2009 to the European Union's “Eastern Partnership” program.

According to the official line of the Belarus government, the European Union is a crucial part of Belarus’ foreign policy. Belarus and the EU have many joint issues to deal with. These include the transit and supply of energy and mineral resources, crime, the environment, as well as regional and cultural partnership. Belarus’ trade with the EU continues to grow. Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, France, and Belgium are major export markets. At the official political level Belarus offers the EU a new comprehensive collaboration with the political sphere as an integral part of shared relations.

Belarus' official reaction to the Eastern Partnership initiative can be called a concept of positive pragmatism. "Positive" in that the initiative can improve relations, both in the political and the trade and economic sectors. Regarding "pragmatism" – cooperation with the European Union, especially within the Eastern Partnership, is one of the instruments for Belarus' economic development and for increasing the export of its products to the EU market. Moreover, cooperation with the EU is an important balance for Belarus' "multi-vector" foreign policy.

With regard to questions of democratization, the government's position is that this is an internal affair and cannot be subject to "blackmail by the European Union". At the same time, during 2009 Belarusian officials repeatedly stated that they were ready to listen to the advice and recommendations of the EU concerning the development of democracy in the country. In this are the Belarusian government has made some positive steps, including the adoption of a new electoral code, which according to European experts is more consistent with the norms and standards of the European Union in the field of electoral law.

### **The approach towards the EU – Belarusian society and the country's political opposition**

The interests and strategies of the Belarusian authorities with regard to Europe remain unchanged, and concern cooperation in the sphere of the economy, energy, and visas. They have upheld the strategy of pragmatic policy on the various levels of interaction with the EU. At the level of policy and public declarations the Belarusian authorities maintain the principle of "no conditions, no mediation" and try to show the public that interaction with Europe is being pursued on principles and conditions set by the Belarusian side. The level of technical cooperation (the most important for the Belarusian authorities) is reduced to non-public interaction of higher-level officials in the development and adoption of decisions on specific economic issues, border cooperation, infrastructure projects, loans, investments, projects in the Eastern Partnership, and so on. There are attempts to transfer all significant issues from the top political levels to the lower levels of concrete technical cooperation.

The involvement of Belarus' political opposition is limited to the inclusion of opposition members in consultations and meetings on the elaboration of public positions and declarations. The EU's actual working relationship with Belarus occurs only with the state.

Regarding the Belarusian opposition, a majority of its members very positively evaluated the country's accession to the Eastern Partnership. One small part of the opposition objected to Belarus' participation, demanding that Belarus should first have taken several of the political steps earlier put forward by the European Union as necessary preconditions for the development of relations. Now, one year after the Prague Summit held in May, 2009, support among the opposition for the country's accession to the Eastern Partnership is giving way to scepticism. They do not believe that the EaP can really advance democratization in Belarus. Nonetheless, some opposition politicians do see the Eastern Partnership as a way to free Belarus from total dependence on Russia.

For the moment, the opposition seems divided into two camps: the "Movement for Freedom" of Aleksandr Milinkevich and his supporters – and all the rest. The public strategy of the first is to build the institutional capacity of promoting and maintaining the leadership of Milinkevich. However, with respect to Belarusian-European relations the "Movement for Freedom" is more focused on the development and deepening of contacts within the "instrumental" approach in cooperation with EU, although without much understanding of the basic contradictions or urgent tasks. The actual role of Milinkevich is to publically voice the problems of Belarus at the European level. However, because it is immersed in the current issues of the opposition struggle, even this leading opposition group cannot fully integrate itself into the workspace of Euro-Belarusian contacts. The rest of the opposition is focused mainly on the "conditional" approach – and it has precious little impact on the country's domestic and foreign policy agendas.

The views of opposition groups reflect public opinion. Belarusian society is divided in its opinions concerning all of the important issues of public life. The dividing lines sometimes run parallel to differences between generations, sometimes they reflect the availability of access to alternative sources of information and the level of education. The world outlook and value system of the young generation, the awareness of which was shaped in the period of the Soviet Union's disintegration and the creation of the Belarus state, markedly differs from what is presented by middle-aged people and the elderly. A generation has already come of age that is not acquainted with any other motherland than the independent Belarus. Indeed, it is difficult to find young Belarusians who are nostalgic about the Soviet Union. Such attitudes, however, are rather widespread among the older generations. This is not to say that young people gen-

erally identify themselves with the opposition. Society at large generally does not trust the political class. This scepticism is particularly evident among the younger generations. The fairly high level of education, access to the internet, and the increasing mobility of Belarusian youth allow them to compare the ethical attitudes and quality of thought of their own political class with what is represented by European politicians.

One more characteristic of the new situation is that there has been more understanding in Belarus of Europe's nature and the necessities for full-scale cooperation with Europe. Belarusians have understood and valued Europe's humanitarian, philosophical, and economic impact within their society. There is no reason to explain the benefit of developing high-grade economic cooperation with the EU, for the overwhelming majority of politicians, officials, experts, and ordinary citizens understand it well.

Nonetheless, sociological studies indicate that the share of strong supporters of cooperation with Europe is only about 50 percent. But we need not overestimate the significance of this, as the process of forming European identity proceeds slowly and unevenly.

The geo-political choice of Belarusian society, as many analysts have noted, remains highly controversial. This is confirmed by research results of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

	Dec. 2002	Mar 2003	Sept. 2005	Nov. 2006	Dec. 2007	Sept. 2008	Dec. 2008	Mar 2009	Sept. 2009	Dec. 2009	Mar 2010
Yes	60.9	56.4	38.0	36.6	37.1	26.7	30.1	34.9	44.1	40.7	36.2
No	10.9	11.9	44.0	36.2	35.0	51.9	40.6	36.3	32.8	34.6	37.2

**Table 1:** Dynamics of answering the question: "If a referendum on the question whether Belarus should enter the European Union were being conducted now in the country, what choice would you make?" (in %).

	Sept. 2003	Dec. 2005	Jun. 2006	Dec. 2007	Sept. 2008	Dec. 2008	Mar 2009	Jun. 2009	Sept. 2009	Dec. 2009	Mar 2010
Russia	47.6	51.6	56.5	47.5	54.0	46.0	42.4	42.1	38.3	42.1	41.4
EU	36.1	24.8	29.3	33.3	26.2	30.1	35.1	41.4	42.7	42.3	40.4

**Table 2:** Dynamics of answering the question: "If you had to choose between integration with Russia and entering the European Union, what would you choose?" (in %).

Public opinion in Belarus concerning geopolitical priorities is quite changeable. Moreover, it is not always evident what exactly causes the fluctuations. Important events often entail only insignificant changes, sometimes even contrary to the ones expected. On the other hand, it should be noted that changeability turns out to be the reverse side of invariability: fluctuations are insignificant in essence and generally hold to stable levels. However, over longer time periods it is possible to observe a minor declining trend in support for integration with Russia, and practically zero change in the support for Belarus' joining the European Union.

On the whole it is fair to say that Belarusian society for many years has remained divided (if not split) into “Bela-Russians” and “Euro-Belarusians” almost equally.

As to the compatibility of the Belarusian public's political culture and European values, Belarusian society is more prepared to adopt Europe's political values (respect for political and civil rights and freedoms) than its cultural values (respect for the autonomy of the individual, personal lifestyle choices, faith, behavior, sexual orientation, etc.). However the awareness of institutional connections with the EU remains extremely low. This includes awareness of the European Partnership.

### **Perception of the Eastern Partnership in Belarus – the most important advantages of the EaP**

According to Belarusian experts (both governmental and independent) the EaP initiative should bring some important and positive long-term effects.

A seminar on the EaP held in the Minsk International Educational Center on March 25, 2010 offered the following hierarchy of positive effects:

1. Cooperation in the area of energy security. The Eastern Partnership envisages the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in the area of energy security, which would lead to “the joint management and even ownership of pipelines”. In this way the European Union is planning to implement one of the tasks of the European Security Strategy and to create a belt of good neighborhood and stability;

2. The European Commission, within the framework of the EaP, is planning to gradually reduce visa costs and to simplify visa procedures and, in the long-term perspective, to introduce a visa-free regime for partner countries;
3. Step-by-step economic integration with the European Union;
4. Adoption of a free-trade zone agreement;
5. The participant country needs to fully adopt the *acquis communautaire* and to recognize the decisions of the European Court as binding.
6. Complex programs of financial support. The Eastern Partnership project also envisages the gradual increase in financial assistance in the region: from today's €6 per person to €12 per person in 2013 and to €20 in 2020.

This approach is also expressed by Minister Sergei Martynov, who believes that the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership will benefit all – the official authorities, the NGO sector, and the population at large:

“It may sound like a paradox, however the entire country stands to benefit. It seems infeasible to separate the benefits for the opposition from those for the authorities. [...Nonetheless, the opposition states the EaP] will legitimize the political situation in Belarus, which will receive investment and credits. However, one should realize that as new resources and new technologies will be coming into the country, Belarusians will have access to new jobs, new experiences, and to the higher standards of discipline. Contacts per se, opportunities to travel around Europe and experience the European lifestyle – all that is of great significance already. [...] This is a historical event for Belarus and I am not afraid of sounding grandiose. Indeed, so far this is only a potential window of opportunities. However, there has been a real breakthrough. For centuries Belarus was at the crossroads between two civilizations and today it is being pulled from both sides – by both Moscow and by Europe. [...] It is worth seeing the historical significance for the fate of Belarus. Some of the most radical opponents of the regime should realize that their negative attitude towards certain personalities should not be transferred to the issues of the geopolitical and historical choice of Belarus. This is due to the fact that leaders come and go, while if Belarus enters the European context, that will be irreversible. The European Partnership may serve as an anchor that will sustain Belarus and that at a particular moment will assist Belarus to stand against the creeping Russian expansion.”

## **The doubts raised by NGO experts and leaders concerning Belarus' closer ties with the EU**

1. Though it sounds nice that we are discussing the creation of a free-trade zone with Europe, so far it is impossible to correlate the two economic systems. The Belarusian economy is still largely based on administrative tools, while market reforms are inconsistent. Indeed, until the moment Belarus enters the World Trade Organization it doesn't make sense to talk about a free-trade zone with the European Union.
2. A large body of Belarusian legislation also needs to be adapted to European Union standards. This is a huge amount of work. Moreover, there are certain areas where the Belarusian authorities are not eager to move forward. Perhaps therefore a limited format for participation in the Eastern Partnership might be chosen.
3. The Belarusian authorities would like to enjoy pragmatic partnership in areas such as investment, migration, border control, and energy transit – that is, in those areas that seem neutral in the sense that they do not demand adopting measures in the area of political liberalization. In the meanwhile, these processes are interlinked – such that economic regulations, if implemented consistently, would act to promote changes in the political sphere.

### **Belarus' governmental engagement in EaP activities**

The Belarusian diplomatic office has identified the main conditions and areas of participation in the EaP from 2008 to 2009. In sum, this approach includes the following principals and main components of cooperation:

1. Respect for the national interests of each neighboring country, safeguarding the sovereignty of the new neighbor-states, and reinforcement of regional and pan-European security and stability;
2. A flexible approach, combining a uniform regional strategy with individual country cooperation programs geared toward practical objectives. These objectives should be adopted and implemented within a joint institutional framework;

3. Differentiated approach, taking into account individual domestic developmental characteristics and the European aspirations of each state.

Here I shall list the key objectives of cooperation for Belarus regarding each thematic platform:

*1. Regarding the first thematic platform:*

Enhanced political dialogue, i.e., within upgraded and diversified structures and mechanisms of mutual consultations at various levels.

Besides this, it is necessary to provide for the long-term involvement of the neighbor states in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decision-making. This should be envisaged through granting them observer status in its structures and setting up joint working bodies. A multi-dimensional Eastern Regional Forum should be created, comprising the six partner countries, EU institutions, and interested EU Member States.

This dimension of partnership should include the support of democratic reforms – which is to say that the development of balanced and non-discriminatory dialogue both at the governmental and non-governmental level should become another component of the partnership domain. This should focus on the harmonization of national legislation and enforcement practices with common European standards. Setting-up transparent reform-oriented assistance funds, coordinated and monitored jointly by the EU and the neighbor-countries, would be a fitting tool towards this end.

*2. Regarding the second thematic platform:*

Economic partnership as a vital precondition for fundamental modernization and sustainable economic growth in the post-Soviet countries. The long-term goal should be that of pursuing full trade liberalization and steady progress toward a free-trade area, integral to a future single European economic space. In the interim, the reciprocal but asymmetrical opening of markets by the EU and neighbor states through step-by-step lowering of customs tariffs and narrowing the scope of dutied imports should take place. In the short- and mid-term the partnership should also include revision of existing EU non-tariff measures against the neighbor states (i.e., termination of quantitative restrictions, softening of antidumping, compensatory and protective measures), granting full market status to their economies, active support for their

WTO-membership aspirations, simplified access to EU financial resources, insurance of their commercial transactions, and intensified cooperation in the loans and investment area. Belarus proposes the creation of an Eastern Regional Forum and development of its business dimension.

*3. Regarding the third platform:*

A major aim is to raise the reliability and security of the energy system, constructing a corridor from the former Soviet states to Poland. The attraction of European investments in the construction of gas storage in Mozyr is a vital part of the plan.

*4. Regarding the fourth thematic platform:*

Partnership is to be pursued in the area of Justice and Internal Affairs – above all, concerning police, customs, and border issues – with a view to jointly combating illegal migration, trafficking of arms, drugs and people, and other transborder crime. A gradual harmonization of the legislation in Belarus, Ukraine, and other neighboring countries with EU legal instruments should be an element of partnership. It is necessary to enable the progressive involvement of the neighbour states into the process of shaping the “Area of Freedom, Security and Justice”, by providing an appropriate formula for their participation in internal EU mechanisms of cooperation (EUROPOL, EUROJUST, European Judicial Network, European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug-Addiction, etc.). Assistance in EU-standardized upgrading of border infrastructure in the post-Soviet states should be considerably expanded, optimized, and dovetailed with similar programs in the candidate countries.

An important element of this partnership should be the conclusion between the EU and neighboring countries of bilateral readmission agreements, accompanied with granting adequate assistance for their implementation (e.g., for deportation of illegal migrants, construction of temporary detention/accommodation facilities, etc.). This will provide the basis for a free-visa regime in the nearest future.

It should be noted that the participation of government experts and diplomats in the working groups and consultations within the EaP program is not sufficiently enshrined in the media and thus it is not possible to calculate the real results and progress.

Experts say that Belarus will be focusing on the development of its transit potentials: the development of transport corridors, issues of energy security, the simplification of customs pro-

cedures, and the implementation of e-declarations for cargo. Jointly with Ukrainian and Lithuanian partners, Belarus has prepared about 20 regional projects within the partnership in the fields of energy, energy security, transport, transit, border management, tourism and ecology and regarding the general cultural and historical heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Strategic projects include the creation of the Odessa-Brody-Gdańsk oil pipeline, as well as the supply of electricity from Ukraine to Lithuania via Belarus, and co-operating in the field of renewable energy (solar, water, and wind). A Klaipeda-Vilnius-Minsk-Kiev motorway is on the agenda, alongside a European-level ‘Viking’ rail link (from Odessa to Klaipeda via Minsk).

### **Belarus’ civil society response to the EaP**

The Eastern Partnership has raised expectations and served as a catalyst for the mobilization of Belarusian civil society and the intensification of pro-European activities in Belarus.

The EU’s offer to include Belarus in the Eastern Partnership was met with enthusiasm, especially by the third sector. The EaP was interpreted by the majority of civil society as a new opening and a historical opportunity for Belarus – one, however, which does not guarantee change.

In 2009, various NGOs and political movements decided to convene the Belarusian European Forum, aimed at mobilizing the potential and the supporters of Belarus’ pro-European forces. The Forum (held in November 2009), was one of the important events of the year in Belarus. Attended by some 1000 persons, including several MEPs, it reaffirmed the pro-European stance of most of the actors within Belarusian civil society, along with the adoption of a common strategy for further work to raise awareness about the advantages of European integration and to involve the public sector in dialogue with the EU.

Representatives of Belarus’ NGOs also took part in the EaP’s Civil Society Forum (CSF). The Belarusian NGOs have proved to be highly organized and capable of developing relevant joint proposals in order to institutionalize the CSF. The preparedness of the Belarusian delegation allowed the nomination of Sergei Mackievic, Chair of the Assembly of NGOs in Belarus, to be the spokesperson of the CSF in its dealings with the European Commission and the EU Council of Ministers.

By the end of 2009 the initial enthusiasm of the third sector had somewhat faded – mainly due to lack of progress in extending civil society’s space and scope in Belarus. Indeed, the legal framework for the third sector in Belarus has hardly changed. However the authorities were creating consultative councils engaging civil society’s representatives without any real decision-making powers and implementation mechanisms.

The new period of Belarus-EU relations is characterized by a longer lag in political change. This lag could be reduced via inclusion into the system of Belarus/EU relations of such players as civil society and via development of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

The joint position of Belarus’ NGOs is that the EaP carries a number of risks. The main one concerns “the government comes first” approach. For this can serve the preservation and legitimization of the authoritarian system in Belarus. One mechanism of this would be the authorities’ strengthening of the “GONGOs” (Government-operated Non-governmental Organizations – *sic!*) in an effort to replace independent NGOs in EU-funded projects, thus marginalizing them even more.

In this respect, NGO experts deem it very important to continue the regular involvement and consultations of civil society actors on issues of EU-Belarus relations. At the same time, civil society actors should be encouraged to go beyond confrontational logic and come forward with more realistic and positive proposals in line with their capacities and resources, as well as with larger societal needs.

Another priority should be that of developing the capacity and expertise of civil society, and allowing its representatives to be useful intermediaries between public institutions and EU partners in all EaP platforms and initiatives. Sadly, most European institutions do not perceive civil society as a real player, preferring traditional forms of communication and cooperation with the state and with a certain spectrum of opposition political forces. However, the inclusion of civil society in the processes of the Belarus-EU working relationship is one of the important prospects for developing relations. One more important task for civil society in Belarus is that of introducing the working processes of the Civil Society Forum to the public sphere.

## The EaP's future – prognoses

The success of the Eastern Partnership will depend to a large extent on changing the EU's paradigm of thinking about its Eastern neighbors. At the same time the success of the EU's activities aimed at increasing cooperation and strengthening ties with countries of the Eastern Partnership initiative depends mostly on those countries' determination in implementing the necessary reforms and on the progress of democratization. Current developments in this area do not encourage optimism. The typical point of view is that today's relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbors after one year of the project are characterized by mutual frustration.

Neighboring countries are frustrated with the lack of productive cooperation, and the EU is discouraged with the lack of progress in democratic transformation. In the face of economic problems, deepened by the effects of the global crisis and political chaos, one can hardly hope for immediate and spectacular changes. Yet at the same time, it is the economic crisis which emphasizes the pragmatic need for modernization and makes it possible even for such countries such as Azerbaijan or Belarus to accept democratic reforms in exchange for economic cooperation.

The Eastern Partnership is in its early development, and its future will depend on many factors, among them: the respective abilities and intentions of all actors, common EU positions, the aspirations of neighboring countries, interaction with the EU at all levels, and the role of Russia.

For the present we can say that the EaP exhibits a conceptual and project phase in its evolution. Conceptually, we can say that the Eastern Partnership is doomed to a kind of "synthesis approach", both in terms of the principles of its construction and in terms of funding. As for its conceptual foundations, they now include:

- combined funding;
- a combination of bilateral and regional cooperation formats;
- a flexible combination of cooperation on the basis of two principles: mutual interests (i.e., pragmatism), and common values (i.e., the progressive involvement of neighboring countries);
- comprehensive coverage (this program involves a large amount of options of cooperation on the basis of thematic platforms);

- diversity of contractual and legal forms.

Obviously, the conceptualization of the Eastern Partnership as a program is not complete; it still features a variety of political meanings. Indeed, this variety in interpreting this new European project is readily apparent through the prism of the dominant metaphors of Eastern Partnership discourse.

In most countries of “old Europe”, the Eastern Partnership is formulated as a program of:

- opportunities for neighboring countries to be gradually incorporated into different types of EU Cohesion policy and EU programs;
- integration of neighboring countries in the common market;
- cooperation in all sectors, but without membership in the EU (Eastern Partnership is not a “pre accession program”).

In some Central European member states the Eastern Partnership is interpreted sometimes as “an instrument of EU policy towards Russia”. Not surprisingly then, Russia, too, has its own specific perception of the EaP:

- “the EaP is an instrument for ousting Russia from the post-Soviet sphere”;
- “the EaP is a soft version of GUAM”.

As for the typical perception of the Eastern Partnership in post-Soviet countries invited to the program, there is a quieter pragmatic attitude, expressed thus: the Eastern Partnership entails opportunities, particularly in the economic sphere, for the development of closer and full cooperation with the European Union.

### **Closing remarks**

The Eastern Partnership initiative modifies the European Neighbourhood Policy – the original model of the EU’s cooperation with its neighbours – in the direction of concentrating on the most important problems of the region. It is proving successful in addressing the current challenges – when it is implemented consistently. Instead of promoting “large projects”, the EU should focus on carrying out specific tasks within thematic programs and on transborder regional cooperation.

The EU should extend the Eastern Partnership, as it has proposed, because the EaP has shown its value as an innovative forum for deepening relations between the Union and its eastern neighbors. In particular, it should reinforce the formal role for civil society actors, supporting the broadest possible channels for discussions.

European policy toward Eastern Europe should advocate a change in the paradigm of Europe's energy supply. The more effectively Europe uses its energy, the greater the reduction in its dependence on Russia. There is considerable scope for improvement in the efficient use of energy, and the use of renewable energy sources should also be expanded. These goals should also be reflected in the programs for technical assistance offered by the EU.

Enormous significance for the shaping of social attitudes in Belarus, ones favourable from the point of view of the EU, is attached to the issue of free travel for Belarusians to the Union.

It is therefore necessary to facilitate citizens of Belarus as much as possible in their travels to the EU within the framework of the *Schengen acquis*. In the nearest possible future the EU should consider deleting Belarus from the black list of countries whose citizens are required to possess visas to enter the territory of the Union.

Lastly, in order to prevent the isolation of Belarus, investment in the growth of Belarus' pro-European elite is highly advisable.

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