



BULLETIN

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Eastern Partnership and EU Policy towards Belarus

by Łukasz Adamski

The inclusion of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the participation of a Belarusian delegation chaired by Vice-Premier Uladzimir Semashka in the EU summit in Prague on 7 May inaugurating this EU initiative, are so far the most important consequences of the EU's new approach towards Belarus. The EU should use the EaP to strengthen ties with this country and provide aid to modernize its economy. At the same time, one should ensure that the EaP does not turn out to be merely a unilateral benefit for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Conditions. For many years, the EU has attempted to thrust upon Belarus respect for human rights and civic freedoms by means of diplomatic boycotts and visa sanctions against those responsible for persecuting the opposition. The EU also suspended the ratification of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Belarus, excluded the country from the Generalised System of Preferences and left it out of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Belarusian participation in ENP was theoretically possible, but so many democratization conditions were attached that from Lukashenka's point of view these were difficult to meet.

The situation changed in 2008. The Belarusian authorities, aware of the country's mounting economic problems and the need to attract foreign investments and to obtain credits for modernizing the economy, made an effort to improve relations with the EU. Their concern was also aroused by Belarus' major political and economic dependence on Russia, especially after the war in Georgia. Consequently, the regime met some EU expectations halfway. It released political prisoners, permitted the distribution of two independent magazines, moved people accused of complicity in the killing of several oppositionists to less prominent positions, and refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite Russian pressure. Although Belarus remains an authoritarian country, which has lately been applying persecution towards young oppositionists in particular, in unofficial statements some Belarusian opposition politicians admit that the number of recorded cases of intimidation of independent activists has fallen considerably. In May this year, Lukashenka announced almost openly that Belarus was prepared to fulfill additional EU expectations provided that they did not threaten the foundations of the country's political system.

It is worth noting that those *nomenklatura* representatives in Lukashenka's entourage who are in favor of a rapprochement with the EU, fearing Russian capital and too close political links with Russia, have become more influential. They are usually associated with Uladzimir Makey and Natalia Petkevich, in charge of the presidential administration, as well as Lukashenka's son Viktor.

As a result, in the second half of 2008 diplomatic contacts between the EU and Belarus intensified, and further visits by Belarusian politicians to the EU and by EU representatives to Minsk have taken place. It is significant that for a long time the Czech presidency was considering inviting Lukashenka to the EaP inaugural summit in Prague. In the end, the invitation that was extended was not a personal one (the addressee being Belarus in general), but it was left to the Belarus authorities to decide on the composition of the delegation. Although the Belarusian president's participation was formally possible, in the end Lukashenka did not come, probably because he wanted to avoid a public scandal. He probably also took into account the stance of Russia, which views the EaP with distrust.

The EaP and the Expectations of the EU and Belarus. Through the EaP the EU is first of all seeking to obtain real means of influence over the situation in Belarus, hoping that a consolidation of economic links and an end to the diplomatic isolation of Belarus will encourage the regime to undertake democratic change and stop Belarus' increasing dependence on Russia, which could destroy chances for the country's democratization.

The Belarusian authorities are interested mainly in the economic benefits that the creation of a free trade zone, intensified trade with the EU, credits from European banks and an improvement to the investments climate would bring. They are also counting on help in improving the quality of Belarusian production. Among the possible spheres of cooperation they list customs and trade policy, energy, transport, the struggle against cross-border crime and illegal migration, the environment and agriculture. At the same time, they warn that the EU should treat Belarus on an "equal rights" basis, in other words accept the current system of government there.

Consistently in favor of Belarusian participation in the EaP is Alyaksandr Milinkevich, opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential elections and leader of the pro-European "For Freedom" movement, as well as numerous Belarusian experts. On the other hand, most of the opposition (including the liberal United Citizens Party and the right-wing Party BNF, formerly the Belarusian National Front), as well as many human rights defenders, had been opposing Belarusian membership in this initiative for a long time. They claimed that an end to sanctions and public meetings with politicians responsible for human rights violations were unilaterally advantageous for the regime, which merely exploits them for propaganda purposes. They insisted that Belarus join the EaP only after genuine democratization. But when it turned out that the EU was ignoring their stance, they finally lent their support to the EaP, and protested only against inviting Lukashenka to the Prague summit.

Conclusions. Due to society's passiveness, persisting considerable support for Lukashenka, weak opposition, the danger of Belarus' increased dependence on Russia and the failure of the hitherto strategy of enforcing democratization by isolating the regime, the EU's adoption of a policy of positive conditioning towards the authorities of Belarus and the inclusion of that country in EaP was justified.

It is worth taking advantage of improved relations with Belarus and EaP instruments to enhance contacts with the country's leadership, especially with the group of "pragmatists" surrounding the president, and to promote cooperation at local government level. Enhanced economic cooperation with Belarus is called for. Apart from economic benefits to both sides, this will encourage a transfer of European standards of enterprise to Belarus, so that the Belarusian business community will become linked to the EU economy. One should engage in lobbying in favor of the presence of EU firms in Belarus and their involvement in the local privatization program. It is worth developing cooperation in the energy sector, and in particular to integrate the system of energy and energy recourses transport in Belarus with the system of the EU. Belarus should also receive help in modernizing its infrastructure. Because of their measurable advantages for Belarusian society, as well as for the EU itself (e.g. in the form of transport routes), these actions should not depend strictly on a relaxation of the political system.

The EaP should also be used to facilitate contacts between Belarusian and EU societies. This could be encouraged by the liberalization of visa system, especially the abolition of visa fees; programs of short-term study visits to the EU for Belarusian pupils, students and representatives of the administration; and support for voluntary service. In this regard, the Belarusian opposition should be consulted on EU initiatives, so that representatives of civic society may be included in dialogue between the EU and Belarus. Thus opposition activists will have somewhat better protection against persecution by the regime, although it should be remembered that the protests of many opposition leaders against EaP indicate that they have no great understanding for either the essence of the initiative itself or the realities of international politics.

Only the departure of Lukashenka and his team and the formation of a civic society in Belarus can provide a long-term guarantee of an improvement in living standards there, enhancement of independence and the introduction of democracy and rule of law. Therefore, the authorities in Minsk should find themselves consistently under pressure for a further relaxation of the system of government, making the level of political cooperation in EaP dependent upon concessions that would encourage the development of a civic society. To accelerate Belarus' democratization, its leadership should be presented with the prospect of functioning under conditions of political pluralism, quoting as an example the changes that took place following changes of government in Slovakia (1998) and in Ukraine (after 2004).