



BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)

Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Beata Górka-Winter • Artur Gradziuk • Roderick Parkes • Beata Wojna

How Can Belarus' Involvement in the Northern Dimension Be Used to Improve Relations with the European Union and Poland?

Anna Maria Dyer

Although Belarus is not a member of the Northern Dimension it has been participating for several years in logistics, transport and environmental partnerships related to this programme. Giving Belarus observer status makes it possible to implement projects in the fields of regional and energy cooperation, and to transfer good practice, all of which are relevant for the EU. Poland should support the wider inclusion of Belarus in the work of the Northern Dimension, which in the long term can contribute to improving Belarusian relations with the EU and its active participation in the Eastern Partnership.

The Role and Functions of the Northern Dimension. The Northern Dimension (ND), which was created in 1997 on the initiative of Finland, is a broad platform of regional cooperation between the EU countries in the Baltic Sea region, Norway, Iceland and Russia. Four partnerships operating within the Dimension focus on cooperation in the fields of environment (NDEP), culture (NDPC), public health and social well-being (NDPHS), and transport and logistics (NDPTL). The Northern Dimension is complementary to other programmes (such as the Eastern Partnership). On the one hand, it focuses on issues which these programmes have so far touched upon only marginally (such as preventing epidemics, general preventative health care, and financing artistic and cultural activities), and, on the other hand, it complements the cooperation on key issues for the EU and its neighbours (such as the development of transport infrastructure by accelerating the implementation of projects and increasing the number of major investments in the region).

The method of financing the Northern Dimension, similar to the way in which the Eastern Partnership is funded, allows for cooperation between wide range of international players such as the EU, partner countries, financial institutions i.e. the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, the Nordic Investment Bank and the World Bank, as well as non-governmental organisations and the private sector. This means that the development of this programme depends not only on the financial commitment of the member states, but also on the support of other entities.

Benefits of Belarusian Participation in the Northern Dimension. Although Belarus does not have observer status in the Northern Dimension, this country has, since 2009, participated in the environmental partnership and partnership on transport and logistics. Belarusian authorities hope that with the expansion of the transport network (two transport corridors, Klaipeda-Vilnius-Minsk and Berlin-Warsaw-Minsk-Moscow, both important from the EU point of view, pass through Belarusian territory) their country will become a centre for logistics and freight forwarding companies trading with entities of the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

For the EU, Belarusian involvement in the work of the Northern Dimension in the field of the environment is especially important, all the more so because pollution from Belarusian rivers has a direct impact on the Baltic Sea,

which is in part fed from these rivers and is a natural reservoir shared by many EU countries. On reaching environmental goals, Belarus received €1 million in 2012 from the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership. The framework of this partnership also includes plans to build three wastewater treatment plants in Vitebsk, Grodno and Brest (each of these projects will be part-financed by €2 million, which represents approximately 10% of the investment). It is worth noting that the financing of these projects involves cooperation from many organisations. The wastewater plant in Vitebsk will receive additional funding from the Nordic Investment Bank, the Austrian Government, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and technical funds from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Grodno will also receive additional technical assistance grant from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Belarusian participation in the work of the ND is also beneficial for the EU because it allows the Union to make a concerted effort to increase the number of transport links with its neighbours (which will in future have a positive impact on the development of trade and people-to-people contacts), and to prevent problems with energy supply in the region, which are associated with the lack of transmission infrastructure. For those EU countries bordering Belarus, cooperation in the framework of the ND is extremely important, for instance because of the additional opportunity to modernise the common border and transportation infrastructure.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland and the EU. The Northern Dimension is such that it is one of the most technical partnerships aimed at addressing EU initiatives. That is why the possibilities presented by the programme must be used to develop joint projects with Belarus, especially during times of tense relations between Brussels and Minsk. This initiative can increase the opportunities for technical cooperation with Belarusian authorities, including on a local level, i.e., through supporting important regional investment such as wastewater treatment plants. The importance of cooperation with Belarus in the framework of the ND is also apparent from the fact that it is based on values such as good governance, partnership, and social cohesion, which the Union has little possibility to transfer through other initiatives due to limited political cooperation with the authorities in Minsk.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted, that, in the framework of the NDEP, no single project on nuclear safety has so far been undertaken in cooperation with Belarus. Undoubtedly, the construction of Belarus' first nuclear power plant, in Grodno Oblast, and the entry into service of the first reactor in 2016, will increase the need to establish close cooperation in order to keep neighbours informed of possible risks connected with it. This will enhance the level of control that EU Member States have over the project, which could potentially pose an ecological threat to the region.

It is important that all activities undertaken within the framework of the Northern Dimension, such as the development of transport corridors and infrastructure to protect the environment, are also part of the Eastern Partnership goals such as economic integration, competitiveness and convergence of European policies such as transport, social and environmental policies. It would, therefore, be advisable to coordinate projects under both initiatives, in order to achieve the greatest economies of scale and to ensure that Belarus gets cooperation from as broad a spectrum as possible.

The EU should also use the fact that Russia favours the involvement of Belarus in the work of the Northern Dimension (the Russian authorities have repeatedly expressed hope that Belarus will be granted observer status in the ND). For Moscow, the inclusion of Belarus in the framework of the Northern Dimension is not only important for political reasons, but also logistically, because many transport routes (including energy and crude oil and gas pipelines) which connect Russia and the EU pass through Belarus.

The EU can, at the same time, try to use regional dialogue to broaden cooperation in fields such as the environment and health care, by engaging Belarusian authorities in joint projects beneficial for both Belarus and Russia. This is especially the case in areas such as water and air pollution and social well-being, which are problems that Belarus shares with its eastern neighbour. This would allow the EU to use analogous mechanisms of cooperation with both Russia and Belarus. Multilateral cooperation also provides an opportunity for more effectively combating threats in these areas. In this context, the European Union should therefore consider inviting Belarus to work in partnership in addressing public health and social well-being. NDPHS assumptions, such as limiting the spread of infectious diseases and the prevention of habits conducive to non-communicable diseases, fit the priorities of Polish development assistance to Belarus (Polish AID).

Belarus must also be more involved in common cultural activities, within the framework of the Northern Dimension. Common historical aspects mean that cooperation in the framework of the NDPC is especially important for Poland (but also Lithuania), and can complement the existing activities of the Polish government, aimed at protecting and promoting common cultural heritage.