



BULLETIN

No. 127 (580), 21 November 2013 © PISM

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The EU's Post-Vilnius Strategy on Belarus: Time for Changes

Anna Maria Dyner

Due to the freeze in political relations between Belarus and the EU, the country has since the end of 2010 become a secondary player in the Eastern Partnership. The EaP summit in Vilnius is not expected to bring a breakthrough in relations with Belarus; however, it should be used to change EU policy towards neighbours that are not interested in any form of integration. The EU not only has other tools to strengthen the structures of civil society in these countries but also the opportunity to develop technical cooperation with them.

Summit Expectations. While other Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries—Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova—will be signing or initialing Association Agreements with the EU at the EaP summit in Vilnius this month, simply the presence of a delegation from Belarus will be considered a success of the Lithuanian presidency. This success is especially poignant because for a long time before the summit there was much discussion about whether the Belarusian authorities should even be represented, and if so, who should head the delegation. Lithuania wants to avoid the scandal that occurred in Warsaw in 2011 when the Belarusians left the summit. This time, Belarus will be probably represented by Foreign Minister *Vladimir Makey*.

The main hurdles in dealing with Belarus, unlike the other EaP members, include issues surrounding political prisoners and problems with the independence of organisations, parties and media. At the same time, despite initial enthusiasm among Belarusian authorities for the EU initiative, they have almost completely lost interest in this form of cooperation. However, this does not mean that they do not want to improve relations with the European Union, but they expect that this will happen on their own terms. In practice, this would be tantamount to having the EU abolish sanctions against the country and its leaders, which the Member States are against as they have consistently demanded the release of political prisoners as the main condition for a return to talks with Belarus. What is more, the decision to extend the sanctions until October 2014 showed that the EU has continued to monitor the human rights violations in Belarus, and the list of people subject to entry bans may change. From the list, 13 people was excluded (mostly prosecutors), many of whom had moved on from their previous positions. While two people were added: the head of Bobruisk penal colony No. 2 (where Ales Bialacki, considered a prisoner of conscience, is being held) and Bobruisk's deputy.

An additional problem for EU policy is that no rules for relations with EaP countries that are not interested in integration with the EU, such as Belarus, have been developed. That means that conditionality policy will not be effective.

Regional Implications of the Summit in Vilnius on Belarus. Whether all or some of the EaP countries that plan to sign or initial an AA with the EU do so at the summit in Vilnius will not, from a Union point of view, have a major impact on relations with Belarus. However, it might be important for Belarusian–Russian relations. If Ukraine signs the Association Agreement most likely Belarus' relations with Russia will improve, as would its position in the Customs Union (CU) and Common Economic Space (CES). The cooling of Ukrainian–Russian relations after the signing of the agreement by Ukrainian authorities will be used by Belarus President Alexander Lukashenka to gain more concessions from Russia. The authorities in Minsk will be particularly interested in new, suitable contracts for

the supply of energy resources. Thus, the Belarusian side will want to take advantage of the fact that in recent years Russia has never fouled relations with Belarus and Ukraine simultaneously.

However, if Ukraine signs the AA, it may lead to consequences for Belarusian–Ukrainian trade relations. In 2012, trade between the two countries reached \$7.5 billion, of which \$5.57 billion were Belarusian exports (some 76% in petroleum products). These exports, thus, are likely to drop as the Customs Union countries react to Ukraine's signature, which implies negotiations to implement a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, by increasing tariffs to protect their markets. This, in turn, would meet with a reciprocal response from Ukraine, and consequently will hinder trade between the two.

If Ukraine opts not to sign the Association Agreement, then Belarus' relations with Russia may worsen as the Ukrainian government becomes the major recipient of Russian incentives to participate in economic integration projects such as the Customs Union. The Russians, in this scenario, would be less likely to meet Belarus' expectations that Russia stop the collection of customs duties on Belarusian oil products exported outside the CU, which affects the country's income and budget. Likewise, if the Ukrainian authorities were to decide to join the planned Eurasian Union (EAU), Belarus's (and Kazakhstan's) position in the organisation would weaken. If this were to happen, the size and potential of the Ukrainian economy means the most important decisions concerning the EAU would be taken in Moscow and Kiev, and not in Minsk.

Regardless of the final results of the summit in Vilnius, Belarus will remain a secondary country in the Eastern Partnership, and the EU will continue to focus primarily on Ukraine (regardless if whether the Association Agreement is signed), along with Georgia and Moldova.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland and the EU. The lack of interest from the Belarusian side in any form of association with the EU makes the Eastern Partnership one of only a few tools of influence for the EU. The most important task for the EU will therefore be to continue to develop the social dimension of its Belarus policy. One measure should be support for the still weak civil-society structures, especially in terms of creating concepts and programmes for development of third-party structures, the preparation of human resources, and strengthening the Civil Society Forum. The admission of Belarus to the Bologna Process, which will enable Belarusian students to use programmes such as Erasmus+, is also worth considering.

It will also be important to develop support programmes for small and medium-sized enterprises to develop the middle class and strengthen civil society institutions. The possibility of such assistance should be included in the next budget priorities for the EaP countries.

At the same time, the EU should use the potential of the development of technical cooperation in its dealings with Belarus. This applies not only to encouraging the authorities in Minsk to take part in the EU project "Dialogue for Modernisation," but also the instruments offered by other projects, such as the Northern Dimension. In talks with the Belarusian authorities, the European Union should continue to raise the issue of visa liberalisation. The obstacle so far has been the Belarusian side's lack of will to sign a readmission agreement; however, making an exception to EU rules and reducing visa fees for Belarusians is worth considering.

One of the main advantages of the Eastern Partnership is the fact that it engages all of the participating countries in multilateral cooperation. This type of cooperation should therefore be particularly promoted by the EU, for example, in the form of real financial support for infrastructure projects planned jointly by an EaP member.

Poland should also propose a roadmap for Belarus that would refer to specific expectations of local authorities, including the release of political prisoners and changes in law (including in economic areas). The document should include projects of interest to the Belarusian authorities, especially those concerning energy security, the development of transport networks, and border infrastructure, where the EU could offer financial assistance.

Poland, as one of the initiators of the "Dialogue for Modernisation," should also initiate a review and update of the programme, especially in finding a platform in which it would be able to maintain technical cooperation with the Belarusian authorities. Polish authorities should also continue to make reports on the situation in Belarus to other EU Member States.

At the same time, it is worth considering the possibility of future trade cooperation between the European Union and the planned Eurasian Union (EAU). The fundamental rules of the EAU are largely based on those of the EU, such as the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour within the organisation's states. Such a link may in time greatly facilitate not only economic but also political cooperation.