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**Belarus and European Policy:
Issues and Perspectives**

by

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Belarus and European Policy: Issues and Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Relations between Belarus and Europe are entering a new period. But the seemingly low pace of change will stimulate the main players into rolling back their strategies to more traditional forms of political activity. For example, a re-visiting of the conditionality approach in the development of European relations is likely, threatening to freeze new relations in the long-term. This threat could be prevented only via including civil society, via the development of the mechanisms of the Eastern partnership Civil Society Forum.

1. FUTURE CHALLENGES

Following the resumption of cooperation in mid 2008-late 2009 and the rapid development of the EaP initiative, a new stagnating period has begun in the political sphere; a period when making quick decisions, immediate actions and concluding public agreements is coming to an end. The intensity and novelty of the events of 2008-2009 is slowly disappearing, with doubts now arising as to where the visible results lie.

All basic political decisions are already accepted: Belarus is included in the Eastern Partnership from which basic structures are formed (except for EuroNest¹); civil society has received its own place in the form of the EaP Civil Society Forum; sanctions against Belarus are temporarily frozen; agents and coalitions inside the country (authorities, civil society, political opposition) have defined their positions and priorities concerning Belarus' cooperation with the EU, as well as concerning the Eastern Partnership; and the EU's supranational structures and the interested national governments of the EU and the EaP have signed all diplomatic actions with Belarus.

The political process is transforming from the dynamic events of the past two years, into a working stage of long-term implementation of political decisions, whose agenda includes the questions of the development and implementation of concrete projects for the EaP's thematic platforms, real steps to simplify the visa regime and the implementation of expectations on the liberalization of the regime in Belarus. For all political players (Belarus authorities, EU structures, Belarusian civil society and political opposition) the new situation is characterized both by a relative quietness in terms of public statements and open passages, and by the need to do work hidden from public attention. This carries significant risks. The external freezing of the situation and the loss of dynamics requires attention to be turned to other processes (both at the level of Belarus-EU interaction and at the level of the Eastern Partnership as a whole).

In terms of the introduction of financial and procedural tools of the Eastern Partnership, holding working meetings on the design of EaP multilateral engagements, preparation of case-specific projects of cooperation between Belarus and the EU, the launch of standing bodies and mechanisms of the Civil Society Forum and the conceptual elaboration of further development

¹ EuroNest is a structure of the Eastern Partnership created under the aegis of the European Parliament, which unites parliamentary representatives of European countries and partner-countries. EuroNest is to consist of 120 deputies: 60 will represent the European Union, whilst the rest (10 per each country) - the countries of the Eastern Partnership. The formation of EuroNest has been postponed due to disagreements over whom should represent Belarus. The European Parliament called for 5 official parliamentary representatives and 5 from the opposition; an idea rejected by Minsk. Belarusian MPs have called for the support of other countries of the Eastern Partnership for their stance that no special conditions should apply to Belarus.

of the Eastern Partnership, these processes do not create tensions in the information field primarily because they do not involve top political figures. Accordingly, the changes in EU-Belarus relations are not obvious and it is difficult to track them. In this situation, the most vulnerable remain force-oriented cooperation and the "instrumental approach", due to the fact that these actions are "behind the scenes". It automatically makes the opponents of the Eastern Partnership and the power-oriented "conditional" approach stronger, i.e. European cooperation in exchange for democratization. In this context, it makes sense to consider the interests and strategies of the major players in their own spaces: public policy making and working. All basic problems of the future period will be generated by intersections and discrepancies between these two spaces.

2. INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF MAJOR PLAYERS

Belarusian authorities. The interests and strategies of the Belarusian authorities with regard to Europe remain unchanged. The state is still interested in cooperation mainly in the sphere of economy, energy and ecology. It has retained the old strategy of splitting the issues of policy and pragmatism into different levels of interaction with the EU. At the level of politics and public declarations they maintain the principle of "no conditions, no mediation" with politics developed as a screen to show the public that interaction with Europe continues and develops on the principles and conditions set by the Belarusian authorities. The external policy of the Belarusian authorities with regard to Europe lies in various forms of symbolic minor trade concessions (slight democratization of election laws, promises to abolish the Art. 193-1 of the Criminal Code, etc.) aiming at maintaining the visibility of the process of democratization and liberalization. In the meantime the repressive state machinery is constantly used to verify the possible depth, intensity and location of those areas where the preservation of authoritarian practices do not put obstacles for Euro-Belarusian cooperation. The last and the most important issue for the Belarusian authorities, is the low interaction of higher-level officials in the development and adoption of decisions on specific issues of economic, border cooperation and so on. This is important as it allows the centre to be able to retain its anti-European rhetoric, whilst cooperation on a technical level continues to work well.

The European structures. Here it is not so important to distinguish between the different levels of competence and nature of their work. It is important to note only the fact that firstly, their policies are coordinated in some way (the decision of the OSCE on elections are the basis for decision-making for the European Parliament, Commission and Council, etc.) and secondly, the various institutions and structures are not homogeneous in their attitudes towards Belarus. While some, such as the European Commission, focus on particular issues such as visa policy, others such as the European Parliament attempt to resolve issues of political dialogue with Belarus.

The complexity of reconciling between the different levels of interaction assigned to different institutions, leads to some unbalance in EU policy towards Belarus. It also gives a fairly broad space for both the Belarusian authorities (it is possible to cooperate on some levels, and freeze it on the other), and other players. Thus the Belarusian authorities can show some progress in the field of the visa issue, whilst inhibiting in every possible way the dialogue on questions of human rights. And vice versa - the European Commission or EU national governments can carry out negotiations on questions of power supply, whilst giving attention in public to questions of liberalization and human rights.

The European policy was and remains ambivalent: on the one hand, it is clear that the policy of sanctions and conditions does not work whilst cooperation continues. On the other hand, it needs to "maintain face" and respond to human rights violations and the lack of progress in democracy. European policy is also beginning to split in the level of declarations (the latest

example being a European Parliament resolution²). At this point it is very important to define whom the European institutions consider as a vis-à-vis in the working relationship with Belarus. In this capacity the Belarusian State, the political opposition and civil society are all contenders. If it comes down to public bodies only, we can assume that the policy of the European Union will be framed within the principles of the Belarusian authorities ("no conditions, no mediation"). However the EU is trying to incorporate even the political opposition (for example, talks about the Belarusian delegation in EuroNest in the framework of the Eastern Partnership). This leads to a rather strange situation. Since the political opposition does not have influence at all in the country, including it in a real interaction at least on some issues also seems virtually impossible. Involvement is limited to the inclusion of opposition members in consultations and meetings on the elaboration of public positions and declarations. Again, the actual working relationship occurs only with the state. As a result the "condition-based" principle of European policy becomes dominating, which in turn leads either to a new freezing of relations, or to a cynical form of interaction on the principle of "say one thing and do another."

The two variants of the European policy described above do not contribute to changing the situation in Belarus. A different approach is possible only when civil society becomes the necessary party to any real processes of cooperation. Some steps have already been made in this direction (creation of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership), however there is still a way to go to including civil society in real interactions. In addition, most of the European institutions do not perceive civil society as a real player, preferring traditional forms of communication with the state and a certain spectrum of oppositional political forces. However, the inclusion of civil society is the only prospect of development of relations.

The democratic opposition in Belarus. The democratic opposition is apparently divided into two camps: the Movement "For Freedom" of Mr. Milinkevich and his supporters and all the rest (in the majority of cases, they are fragmented; their influence, if compared to the former, is almost nil). Public strategy of the former is to build institutional capacity and maintain the leadership of Aleksandr Milinkevich. However, with respect to Belarusian-European relations the Movement "For Freedom" is more focused on the development and deepening of contacts using an "instrumental" approach, although without much understanding of the basic and urgent tasks needed. The actual role of Mr. Milinkevich is to implement the functions of the public concerns of Belarus at the European level. However, even this leading opposition group, being immersed in the current issues of the opposition struggle, still cannot fully integrate into the workspace of the Euro-Belarusian contacts.

The rest of the opposition, seemingly out of all relevant domestic and foreign policy agenda, is focused mainly on a "conditional" approach. Slow dynamics bring a traditional form of interaction for Euro-Belarusian relations: the exchange of accusations. Public life in Belarus becomes marked by repressions, human rights violations, mass rallies, non-transparent elections, etc. European agencies have given statements concerning these facts which provoked a backlash from official Minsk, which in turn affected the general state of relations and lead to an increase in conflict. In this situation, the 'face' for all parties to the conflict could be saved, but no positive changes in the country would occur. This stalemate can be overcome only by the creation of working mechanisms to deal with human rights violations in Belarus. This work can be conducted only within the development of the Eastern Partnership structures and Euro-Belarusian contacts within the "instrumental" approach. The resumption of sanctions is only beneficial to the stakeholders interested in the country's isolation and the cessation of the development of Belarusian-European relations. The interests of the opponents of the Eastern Partnership - pro-Moscow European forces and official Moscow itself - paradoxically coincide with the interests of the democratic opposition in Belarus.

Civil society. Key for the development of European-Belarusian relations, as well as more general changes in the country, remains civil society. Civil society unites the larger part of the

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B7-2009-0250&format=XML&language=EN>

independent intellectual, organizational and manpower resources of the country, and is almost wholly pro-European in focus, especially those forces grouped around the Belarusian delegation to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. The clear leaders of the process are the Assembly of NGOs and the Consortium "EuroBelarus"³, represented in the standing bodies of the Forum. The consolidation efforts are rather fragile and will be seriously tested in the future. With the pace of events now slowed down, (the first Forum already took place and the second one will take place in a year), concrete results will only be revealed later. For the part of civil society not deeply involved in the work of the previous period, the working process of the formation and launch of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum remained hidden and not understandable. This automatically pushed them to the usual mode of action and the old strategies: organizations starting to flee to their private niches and lose interest in the overall political process. The prevention of this is only possible with additional incentives for the designing of participation mechanisms for civil society in the structures of the Eastern Partnership. Many do not understand the possible benefits their participation in the Eastern Partnership would bring and in general they are poorly informed of what it does. As for wider civil society, it is necessary first to launch an educational campaign, and only after that to gradually include them in a working interaction with the leading organizations.

After successful participation in the first Forum, participating organizations must implement all plans agreed upon. There should be a clear working mechanism for the participation of civil society in the monitoring, control and participation in EaP projects and a mechanism of procedural questions. A solution to such operational issues as the organization of the Steering Committee and Working Groups, the implementation of the proposals that were announced at the first Forum, the inclusion of experts from civil society to assess and monitor the processes of cooperation within the Eastern Partnership, and the planning of a future (second) Forum, would demand a high level of expertise from Belarusian civil society, in addition to the need to turn any decisions into concrete actions. There is a catastrophic lack of such expertise and in order to find solutions for most of the issues leaders of the civil society would need to attract the resources of "think-tanks". An example of where this currently works well, is the interaction between HTA (as a thought factory) and the Consortium EuroBelarus.

3. OVERCOMING THREATS: PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Main threats for the future period

1. A possible reversion to the closed situation of 2006-2008 and a new freeze in European-Belarusian cooperation.
2. Dissociation and passivity of civil society as a consequence of a return to the familiar forms of existence and activities.
3. Loss of influence of civil society in the formation and activities of the Eastern Partnership bodies as a consequence of a failure while implementing the goals set up by the first Forum.

To overcome these threats the joint efforts of all the forces advocating for the Eastern Partnership in the "instrumental" approach are needed.

Recommendations to Belarusian civil society

The main task should be to introduce the working processes of the formation mechanisms of the Civil Society Forum to the public space.

³ The author is a founding member of the Consortium EuroBelarus that prepared and sent to Brussels a proposal on organizing Civil Society Forum within The Eastern Partnership.

1. To create own informational inserts in independent newspapers on European issues, with a minimum frequency of once every two months, which could be developed into a "European Day" on the radio, or a targeted TV Program on the Belsat TV Channel.
2. To introduce educational programs regarding the EP for a number of organizations, especially NGOs, such as the holding of informational roundtables for civil society (thematic and regional NGOs).
3. To appoint focal points for thematic platforms at the national level.
4. To develop a mechanism of broad consultation for all interested organizations, members of the Forum and expert organizations.
5. To launch an interactive platform for the State and civil society (perhaps in the form of a "reincarnated Public Advisory Council").
6. To develop and expand the public and open dialogue within civil society, in particular the holding of a national Civil Society Forum (April 2010) therefore completing the process of formation of this area as part of the infrastructure of the EP at the national level.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations outlined above are key to ensuring that the Eastern Partnership, together with all its structures and mechanisms, is considered to be a proper tool of democratization and liberalization; the essence of the so-called instrumentalist approach. By developing an enhanced cohesion among civil society in Belarus, especially in terms of advocating the mechanisms of the Eastern Partnership, the threat of a re-lapse in EU-Belarusian relations becomes less likely. With greater public knowledge of the Civil Society Forum, and a further development in uniting forces working towards an 'instrumentalist' approach, Belarusian civil society can advance the idea of a pro-European future for the country as a whole.