



Students Scientific Conference

EU – Belarus Relations in the Frameworks of European Neighbourhood Policy

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Banská Bystrica

2012

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Belarus – EU Relations in the framework of European Neighborhood Policy

Introduction

"Our Neighborhood Policy provides us with a coherent approach that ensures that the whole of the EU is committed to deeper relations with all our neighbors. At the same time, it allows us to develop tailor-made relations with each country."

Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy [1]

The relations between Belarus and the EU are very complicated and controversial. From the one hand, there is a very strong tension in political sphere. There are sanctions from the EU side imposed against more than 200 Belarusian citizens, because of deep discords in political and diplomatic spheres. On the other hand, there is still strong economic, cultural, educational cooperation between Belarus and the EU. This cooperation is built both on bilateral basis (Belarus with each EU country, especially Poland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, France, Italy, Spain, Slovakia) and multilateral basis (Belarus in the Eastern Partnership Project, Belarus and Visegrad Four countries – the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary).

Thanks to media, the fact of deterioration of the relations between Belarus and the EU is well known. The main goal of this essay is to show the diversity of cooperation between the EU and Belarus and analyze not only the problems, but also the positive results in mutual relations.

Historical Background of Belarus – EU Relations

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union one of the most important decisions for independent Republic of Belarus was the definition of the priorities of external relations. Belarus has chosen the “multidirected foreign policy” and follows this concept until now.

Being the neighbors both Belarus and the EU¹ has been always trying to establish stable and mutual effective relations. The European Community recognized the independence of Belarus from the very beginning when it was announced in 1991.

But from the very beginning the relations of Belarus and the EU were not easy. Soon after the election of President Lukashenko in 1994 the relations became worse. The first legal formalization in 1995 - Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was not successful, although the

¹ Talking about the relations between the EU and Belarus, the term “the EU” also includes the period of European Community (before Lisbon Treaty)

both sides were negotiating it. In response to the deterioration of Belarus' internal political situation, the EU has not ratified it [6]. But then in 1996 the Temporary Agreement on Trade formalized and the relations between the EC and Belarus became more effective, especially in economic sphere.

In 1996 in Belarus the referendum on the changes of Constitution 1994 was held. At the referendum seven questions were observed. Four of them were put by President Lukashenko: changing the date of the country's Independence Day, amending the constitution, changing laws on the sale of land and the abolition of the death penalty. The Supreme Council put three other questions: constitutional amendments by the Communist and Agrarian factions, local elections and the national finances. In the result two questions out of seven were approved. The Independence Day was moved to 3 July and constitutional amendments put forward by President Lukashenko were supported by 88,2% of voters. In the result of constitutional amendments the political power was shifted to executive branch and in particular to the President. The EU did not recognize the results of the referendum. According to the official position of the EU, after referendum "democratic conditions were undermined, in particular, by the replacement of the democratically elected parliament with a national assembly nominated by the president, but also through repression of the opposition and the media, and interference with the judiciary" [7]. These events opened the new period in the relations which is characterized by deep problems and political obstacles that are worsening.

The EU did recognize neither parliamentary elections of 2000 nor presidential elections of 2001 and 2006 in Belarus, declared their non-democratic character. The referendum of 2004 in Belarus, which allowed President Lukashenko to stand in further elections also fostered the negative reaction of the EU.

On 24 September 2004 the history of EU sanctions against Belarus started. Later on 13 December 2004 new sanctions against two officials responsible for the October 2004 fraudulent elections and referendum as well as severe human rights violations in the repression of peaceful demonstrators were declared. On April 10 - 11 2006 the Council decided to adopt restrictive measures against President Lukashenko, who was considered to be responsible for the violations of international electoral standards, in particular those of the OSCE, and international human rights law, as well as for the crackdown on civil society and democratic opposition. These measures took the form of a visa ban and assets freeze [7]. The list of Belarusian persons, against whom the EU has imposed economic and visa sanctions, has been always widened. Nowadays there are sanctions against more than 200 Belarusian personalities not only from political but also from business sphere.

Despite of significant political discord between the EU and Belarus, from 2000 Belarus became a participant of Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) Program, implemented by the European Commission. The main goal of TACIS is “to promote the transition to a market economy and to reinforce democracy and the rule of law in the partner states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia” [10].

Meanwhile, the offer to engage much more strongly with Belarus was set out in the document “What the EU could bring to Belarus”, which the Commission released in November 2006 [3]. In this document both the advantages which Belorussian people can get on conditions that Belarus becomes a full participant of the EU neighborhood policy and the obligatory requirements for Belorussian government for this cooperation are described. There are four main groups of advantages: [3]

1. Improvement of quality of life of Belorussian people (easier traveling, cross-border cooperation, supporting of development of small and medium enterprises, improve the provision of healthcare and education, reform of the legal and judicial system, improve the quality of the environment etc.);
2. Development of contacts between the EU and Belarus (cities cooperation, easier border crossing, scholarships for students etc.);
3. Deepening of -economic and trade relations, more business opportunities (greater access of Belorussian products to the EU market, better possibilities for textile products from Belarus to enter the European market etc.);
4. Significant increase of European financial assistance for Belarus.

According to the document [3], it's possible to achieve all these advantages only “if the Belorussian government takes significant steps towards democratization, which include:

1. Right of the people of Belarus to elect their leaders democratically;
2. Right of the people of Belarus to independent information and to express themselves freely;
3. Rights of non-governmental organizations;
4. Release all political prisoners;
5. Rights and freedoms of national minorities;
6. Rights of workers;
7. Rights of entrepreneurs;
8. Abolishing the death penalty.

In 2008 the relations between Belarus and the EU can be characterized slightly more positive. In October 2008 Council concluded that “The European Union reiterates that it remains

ready to deepen its relations with Belarus and to review the restrictive measures taken against leading Belarusian figures in the light of progress made by Belarus on the path towards democracy and human rights. The Council is ready to assist Belarus in attaining these objectives” [8]. Council Conclusion on Belarus of 2009 was even more positive. It stated, “The Council notes that since October 2008, as a result of the release of internationally recognized political prisoners, new possibilities have opened up for dialogue and deepened cooperation between the EU and Belarus. The Council welcomes the increased high-level EU–Belarus political dialogue, the establishment of a Human Rights Dialogue, the intensified technical cooperation and the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership, as ways of building mutual understanding and creating opportunities to address issues of concern” [9].

From 2009 new multilateral form of cooperation between Belarus and the EU was established. Belarus as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine became a member of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The process of Belarusian membership in the EaP wasn't easy. The EU insisted on democratic and human rights reforms in Belarus to establish mutual beneficial dialog and cooperation. After some positive reforms that has been adopted in Belarus, the country had a possibility to join EaP in 2009. Many effective results were achieved due to this cooperation.

Current Situation in the Relations between Belarus and the EU

The most common opinion nowadays is that the relations between Belarus and the EU are either extremely bad or do not even exist. From the political point of view they are really very complicated, but at the same time it is important do not forget other spheres of cooperation.

It is possible to identify three main aspects in EU - Belarus relations: social, economic and political. If two first spheres of cooperation can be characterized as rather successful, there are many obstacles in political aspects.

Positive tendencies in social sphere cover the cooperation in education (Erasmus Mundus, TEMPUS, DAAD, Visegrad Fund Scholarship Program and others), culture, people contacts. Economic relations between Belarus and the EU have a stable basis and are developing in a positive way. The cooperation in economic sphere is especially interesting for Belarusian side. The EU presents a wide range of opportunities for Belarus: market of 480 million consumers, export possibilities, European financial assistance. The importance of usage of these possibilities is even growing for Belarus now in the conditions of tough economic crisis.

Negative aspects in the relations are mostly concentrated in political dimension and include:

1. EU critics of democracy in Belarus;
2. EU sanctions towards Belarus;
3. Visa difficulties;
4. Political tension between the EU and Belarus.

Political instability between the EU and Belarus has increased after the latest Presidential elections in Belarus on December 19, 2010, when the Central Election Commission declared Alexander Lukashenko a winner by with 79.67% of the votes. The EU did not recognize the results of these elections and declared them as non-democratic and falsified.

In response to not having invited Lukashenko to the EaP summit of 2011 in Warsaw and discriminating against Haysyonak, the country's ambassador to Poland who was appointed to represent Belarus at the Summit, Belarus boycotted the event..

During the latest Summit of European Council on 2 March 2012 the issue of the EU and Belarus relations was discussed. The official Conclusion on the Summit states, that "The European Council expresses its serious and deepening concern over the further deterioration of the situation in Belarus. It welcomes the decision reached at the Council to extend the list of those responsible for serious human rights violations or the repression of civil society and the democratic opposition or supporting or benefitting from the Lukashenko regime to be targeted by a travel ban and an asset freeze. The European Council reiterates the Union's commitment to strengthening its engagement with the Belarusian civil society and to supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people" [11]. This Conclusion underlines the tension in the political affairs between Belarus and the EU, which became worse after February 27, 2012 when Council of the EU decided to increase the number of Belarusian people by 21 persons against whom it imposes sanctions. This became the reason for political scandal between the EU and Belarus. On February 28, Head of EU Delegation in the Republic of Belarus Maira Mora, and Ambassador of Poland to Belarus Leszek Sherepka were suggested to travel to their capitals for consultations to bring their leadership the firm position of the Belarusian side about the unacceptability of pressure and sanctions. In response to these recommendations of Belarusian side, EU countries recalled their ambassadors from Minsk. The majority of EU diplomats left Minsk on February, 29.

One of the main agenda of EaP cooperation is the visa regime liberalization. Joint Declaration of the latest Eastern Partnership Summit of 2011 says, "Dialogues on visa-free regimes have been launched with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Visa-facilitation and

readmission agreements are being implemented with Georgia and similar agreements will be sought with the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Belarus” [12]. But Belarusian people still have to apply for a visa if they want to visit the EU and the same obligatory exists for the EU citizens if they are going to Belarus. The price of visa is 60 euro, what is especially high for Belarusians, taking into account that the average month salary in Belarus is less than 300 euro. The existence of visa obligation is also a question of bureaucracy. People have to provide a lot of documents to get it, what takes time and additional costs.

Despite of many negative tendencies in the relations between the EU and Belarus, significant positive results between two sides were achieved. Among them are:

1. Regional and cross-border cooperation projects in areas such as transport, border management and customs [4];
2. The EU Delegation to Belarus;
3. Eastern Partnership;
4. Civil Society Forum;
5. Office for Democratic Belarus;
6. International Consortium ”EUROBELARUS”;
7. Economic cooperation;
8. Educational cooperation.

The cooperation between Belarus and the EU in economy, education, energy, trade, crime, environment, and culture can be characterized as highly effective. For example, according to the Ministry of Economy of Belarus, “the exports to the countries of the EU grew to 43% in 2010. About 30% of oil and 20% of gas supplies from Russia to the EU pass through Belarusian territory. The share of the EU in the investment to Belarus is 44%” [5]. The participation of Belarus in Eastern Partnership contributes to this cooperation. Students from Belarus can experience the number of European educational programs (Erasmus Mundus, Visegrad Fund Scholarship, Tempus, DAAD and others). EU-funded assistance and cooperation with Belarus involves nearly €100 mil euro worth of projects including regional and thematic both ongoing and in preparation [4]. International Consortium ”EUROBELARUS” was created in 2007 and is functioning to develop Belarusian-European Cooperation and Partnership. Among its activities are issuing of publications, organizing conferences concerning EU-Belarus relations, and sending proposals to Brussels on EU-Belarus relations and others.

Despite of many difficulties between Belarus and the EU, Belarusians associate themselves with Europe, what is proved by the survey among Belarusian citizens. It was a question, what form of

integration should have Belarus with the West. 46,6% of respondents voted for Council of Europe, 42,5% - for the EU, 6,1% - for NATO, 19% - did not answer.

Conclusion

The official position of the EU towards Belarus states, that “The European Union has consistently offered to deepen its relations with Belarus and, while reaffirming its policy of critical engagement, reiterates that such a deepening is conditional on progress towards respect by the Belarusian authorities for democracy, the rule of law and human rights” [12]. One of the main requests addressed to Belarus is the release of all political prisoners and abolishing the death penalty.

Official conclusion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus towards the relations with the EU and its latest actions, says, that “Official Brussels, as well as the capitals of the EU member states should not forget that tactics of intimidation does not work with Belarus. It is impossible to normalize relations with unilaterally imposed conditions, conditions of coercive pressure.

A constructive result can only be achieved by a respectful dialogue on mutually acceptable terms. We hope our partners will understand this” [13].

Each side has its own opinion and does not want to make concessions to each other.

At the same time, however, the deepening and widening of cooperation will be mutually beneficial and effective. That is why it is very important to find and to realize the ways of overcoming nowadays problems.

It is possible to find an effective solution only in the process of negotiations and diplomatic cooperation. Before making crucial negative decisions, as sanctions, diplomatic withdrawal etc., all the problems should be discussed and the decisions should be made in the respect and for people both Belarus and the EU.

It is also important to underline, that fortunately political obstacles and tension in the relations between the EU and Belarus do not cause the huge deterioration in other spheres of cooperation, what makes the EU – Belarus relation perspective and open for future positive changes.

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