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Input paper: Adapting EU Policy – Enlargement and the Future of EU Neighborhood Policy

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**Belarus, the European Union, and the Eastern Partnership: the State of the Art in 2023**, by Dr. Tatsiana Chulitskaya (BIPART / Vilnius University).

After the mass protests in Belarus and a massive wave of solidarity in 2020, the international and European political agenda toward the country has significantly changed. In 2021–2023, Belarus appeared in the news mostly on occasions related to security threats like the Ryanair hijacking, migration crises on the borders with the European Union, and President Aliaksandar Lukashenka’s support for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The deep crisis of human rights and political and civic freedoms violations inside Belarus is getting less attention but is nevertheless discussed at a high EU political level. Since the beginning of the latest political turbulence in the country in 2020, the EU has committed more than €100 million to support the Belarusian people and declared its readiness to activate a €3 billion comprehensive plan once the country [proceeds with democratic transition](#). In parallel, Belarus is a target of extensive Western sanctions that are driven by security concerns, its role in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and human rights violations in the country.

When Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, the program did not become a game-changer in EU-Belarus relations, but it provided institutionalized opportunities for cooperation. There were some expectations of a gradual evolution of the regime toward “softer” authoritarianism and geopolitical neutrality. However, this approach did not create the foundation for substantive political transformation, and it has been criticized for its reactive nature and for overlooking the [previous negative experiences in EU-Belarusian relations](#).

The participation of Belarus in the EaP has always been limited due to diverse structural reasons that caused nonparticipation at the parliamentary level (in the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly) and mostly government-to-government cooperation. In contrast to the government’s pragmatic and technocratic approach to the EaP, civil society has always been active in the third dimension of the program: the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF). This provides the Belarusian National Platform of the CSF opportunities for cooperation in common projects with their counterparts from the five other EaP countries. This cooperation at the level of civil society has reportedly decreased but not stopped since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. From an operational point of view, the EaP CSF became a provider of civil society support projects for Belarus, including with a leading role in the multi-dimensional (organizational development, financial support, consultations for CSOs) [Beehive project](#).

With the deepening of the political crisis, Lukashenka intensified his anti-Western rhetoric and actions. In June 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the suspension of Belarus’s participation in the EaP and the country’s withdrawal from the Readmission Agreement with the EU. Responding to such actions and supporting the democratic aspirations of Belarusians, the EU boosted its cooperation with the democratic forces and civil society. The post-2020 EaP priorities stipulate that cooperation with Belarus focuses on intensifying relations with non-state stakeholders. At the same time, [the EaP flagship initiatives](#) are indicative and subject to a democratic transition in the country. In addition, in June 2023, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell launched a [new consultative](#)

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[group](#) between the EU and the democratic forces and civil society with the goal of a strategic dialogue in the interests of the Belarusian people.

## Current Geopolitical Changes and the Future of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Policy for Belarus

The EU's priorities in the EaP have always focused more on multi-dimensional cooperation than geopolitical issues. However, Russia has never stopped looking at the EaP through a geopolitical prism and perceived it [as Western encroachment](#) to be contested. After Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and especially in 2022, it geopolitics clearly took the top position in the regional agenda for all actors. This shift has caused diverse, primarily negative, outcomes not just for Belarus's government but also for its civil society, opposition, and people.

For the government, this means even fewer chances for cooperation and communication with the EU. Today, official relations are at their lowest level since the 1990s. Some experts say that the [lack of EU leverage](#) pushes Belarus closer to Russia and leaves no geopolitical alternative for Lukashenka but to move further with integration with Russia. However, the situation is more complicated. Lukashenka has been promoting integration with Russia since he came to power, and recently has taken steps in [deepening economic and intergovernmental cooperation](#). Official Minsk has always been interested in receiving EU technical and financial support without implementing democratic changes, human rights, or good governance. There are no grounds to suggest that, even if the EU eases its sanctions and returns to cooperation with the government, there will be any substantial normative changes in Minsk's approach toward the EU.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed attitudes toward Belarus and its people in the EU. If Belarusians were viewed mostly positively before, the situation changed to the opposite despite a consensus that most of them [do not support the war](#) and the active part of civil society's [highly pro-Ukrainian attitude](#). Because of rising security concerns, especially in the EU countries bordering Belarus, Belarusians face new challenges, including negative attitudes in everyday life and severe problems related to their legal status, such as with residence permits (in particular [in Lithuania](#)) and limitations on getting Schengen visas. Reacting to this securitization tendency, Belarusians, especially abroad, push a simple but important message: "Belarusians are not the same as Lukashenka."

At the same time, the opposition has much political momentum in its relations with the EU, with regular meetings and communication with diverse EU representatives and special institutionalized communication channels like the EU-Belarus consultative group. However, the cooperation between the EU and the opposition has so far lacked strategic depth, clear goals, and expected outcomes for Belarusian society. Even before the events of 2020, Belarusian experts criticized the EU (and the West in general) for a [lack of strategy](#) vis-à-vis Belarus. Today, they continue the same line of criticism and promote the necessity of [developing such a strategy](#).

## The EU's Role in Current and Future Relations with Belarus

For Belarus's opposition, civil society, and expert community, a predominant expectation of EU policy concerns a greater influence of the EU in the country. This extends to developing a comprehensive EU strategy toward Belarus with distinctly articulated objectives and a corresponding roadmap. The anticipated EU strategy is viewed as a mechanism to offer guidelines to EU member states, aiming to promote cohesion among them and to align their joint efforts toward Belarus, the Lukashenka administration, and the Belarusian people in a more synchronized and comprehensive way. Furthermore, there are expectations that the EU will offer a clear and appealing geopolitical alternative to the one

offered by Russia. This alternative should challenge Lukashenka's narrative, which posits Russia as the singular option for Belarus.

From the bottom-up perspective of Belarusian stakeholders, there are also expectations that the EU should provide a clear European perspective for the country (for example, candidate status if and when Belarus becomes democratic and can complete the requirements). The EU strategy toward Belarus should encompass an inclusive dialogue with diverse stakeholders.

The government and experts close to it have expectations that the EU will ease its sanctions' and return to technical cooperation. However, it is unclear if and when such a window of opportunity might be opened under the current circumstances, considering Lukashenka's support for Russia's war in Ukraine.

## Key Priorities for the EU in Relations with Belarus

The EU should formulate an economic, political, and institutional offer to Belarus that could be debated in society, assisting the latter in making its geopolitical choice. For this purpose, informational media campaigns promoting a positive image of the EU, the advantages of cooperation with it, and existing opportunities for different target groups would be extremely useful.

Given the current geopolitical context, the perception of Belarus and the actions of Lukashenka's government as security threats is comprehensible. Nevertheless, the policies of the EU and its member states should clearly demarcate between the authoritarian regime and the people. Such an approach fostering a perspective wherein Belarus is regarded as an integral part of the European political, cultural, and economic milieu should be actively promoted. Achieving this objective requires adopting a more balanced and nuanced approach toward the securitization of Belarus and its people. Importantly, there must be no isolation of the Belarusian people from Europe – at the moment, even [representatives of civil society complain](#) that they cannot get visas for themselves and their family members or for participants in civil society organization events abroad.

Measures such as enhancing access to Schengen visas should be implemented to cultivate pro-EU sentiments, underscoring the EU's openness to democratically inclined Belarusians. For example, since 2020, it has mostly been the embassies of Lithuania and Poland (with some rare exceptions when those of other countries helped their partners from civil society) that issue visas for Belarusian activists, people at risk, and their families. Instead, all the embassies of EU member states in Minsk should issue visas for civil society (including family members) and, if resources allow, open opportunities for applying for a tourist visa to the broader public.

Practical support should be extended to address the legal challenges confronting Belarusians compelled to reside abroad. In parallel, there should be visa bans on officials, state-run media journalists, and individuals implicated in repression in Belarus.

Although [civic space inside Belarus is very limited](#), there are continued activities that need to be supported. The EU and its member states must respond to the requests to fund projects and activities inside the country. There should be more information in the country about donors' support programs for organizations and activists, information that currently is mainly spread abroad. In general, when it comes to the support of Belarus, its civil society, and activists who are still in the country, it is essential to hear their voices and assess their own needs rather than make some assumptions about the support they might need.

Even with all its limitations, this EaP is one of the few institutionalized opportunities for cooperation between Belarus and the EU, at least at the level of people-to-people contacts, civil society, and opposition. It is also a platform for meetings and cooperation with their counterparts from Georgia,

Moldova, and Ukraine. Belarusian society needs the EaP, yet the latter's future is more dependent on the other countries' progress toward EU membership.

Within the existing format of the EaP, the track of cooperation with the democratic forces and civil society can be continued. Furthermore, practically all the post-2020 EaP priorities and flagship initiatives related to recovery, resilience, and reforms that are feasible without government involvement can be restructured to involve democratic political actors, civil society, and small and medium-sized enterprises. For example, Belarus can remain a part of the economic and investment plan for the EaP, maximizing the potential of the cultural and creative industries and getting support for Belarusian start-ups that are based abroad. The dimension of "investing in people and knowledge societies to support cooperation between EU and partner countries universities, VET institutions" can be provided at the level of civil society organizations specializing in education rather than state-run universities (which in many cases are involved in repression). Civil society organizations with experience in providing formal and informal education in public administration might be involved in a virtual EaP Academy for Public Administration and share their good practices with partners from other countries. These are just some examples and similar adaptation could be made in the majority of post-2020 EaP priorities.