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Katsiaryna Shmatsina, Belarusian

The Eastern Partnership Is as Strong as its Weakest Link: the Case of Belarus

In 2019, when the Eastern Partnership (EaP) celebrated its tenth anniversary, Belarus said it was willing to host the next summit in Minsk as a demonstration of progress in its membership. In 2021, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the suspension of its membership in the EaP as well as termination of its readmission agreement with the EU. In 2009, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka said that "the joint border with the EU should unite people, not divide them," adding that every euro allocated to Belarus was spent to strengthen the eastern border of the EU.¹ For the past 17 years, the country has received EU money through cooperation projects to improve border management. However, in 2021, Belarusian regime has instrumentalized migration by people from the Middle East to pressure the EU through the artificially created crisis on the border.

Between these dates lay complex geopolitical developments in the region and the various strategies the EU applied when dealing with Belarus, from isolation to engagement. The promotion of democracy "by other means" by the EU was a viable and quite fruitful strategy in times of "normalization" of relations with Belarus.² Belarusian counterparts benefited from exchange programs, small grants, and twinning projects for governmental agencies within the EaP framework. Now, the repression since the August 2020 presidential election has not left any NGO unaffected, targeting even environmental initiatives and shelters for survivors of domestic violence. The Lukashenka regime relies on repression to ensure its survival and perceives any independent civic initiative as a potential threat that could organize protest activity. The progress previously achieved through the EaP platforms, such the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, has been swept away.

The strategy of moderate engagement with Belarusian government agencies and of promoting technical assistance in the past years was not in vain. However, one lesson learned since last year is that all the progress, and the promises of the government, can be reversed in a blink of an eye. Even if the current crisis ends in favor of Lukashenka's regime, the EU should maintain a firm stance, denying his legitimacy and keeping the option of technocratic democratic promotion off the table. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel's attempt to communicate with Lukashenka over the migration crisis was perceived in Belarusian society as a worrisome signal that the EU eventually turns a blind eye to the cruelty of the regime and "betrays" the pro-democratic groups in Belarus.

¹ <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/belarus-i-vpred-budet-udeljat-pristalnoe-vnimanie-razvitiju-oxrany-granitsy-4876>

² <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/10/06/the-eu-has-successfully-pursued-a-strategy-of-democracy-promotion-by-technocratic-means-in-belarus/>

In a similar vein, the EU calls to Russia's President Vladimir Putin to discuss Belarus issues also raise concerns among Belarusians. As much as the EU tried not to antagonize Russia in their shared neighborhood, the Kremlin not only reaffirmed its support to the Lukashenka regime in the current crisis but also used the rhetoric of "protecting the interests of the Union State" whenever the West called for some sort of mediation. The migration crisis allows Moscow to test Poland and the Baltic states and to observe how they deal with provocations at the border. Russia even sends nuclear-capable bombers to overfly Belarus to demonstrate "support" to its ally. At the same time, given that the Lukashenka regime's survival depends on Moscow's support, there is some reason for the discussions with Kremlin. There are some in the expert community who suggest that the Belarus issue should be included in the EU-Russia agenda similarly to Ukraine. Such a move would demonstrate that the EU is consistent in its support for Belarus and stays on course with regards to its democratic values. It is clear that for the Kremlin a democratic transition in Belarus is a threat; yet if Russia ensures that Lukashenka remains in power or is replaced by a puppet candidate from the nomenclature, this would not bring a sustainable solution to the crisis. The demand of Belarusians for a democratic government has not disappeared; rather, it has gone underground, waiting for a new window of opportunity.

Compared to the previous cycle of distancing and rapprochement, the current tensions with the Belarusian regime are a substantially new challenge for the EU, given the scale of human rights violations and brutal tactics of state-sponsored human trafficking. The EU obviously cannot ignore the crisis on its doorstep, with Belarus having become the weak link among the EaP members. While there is little expectation that the EU members can find the political will and consensus to equip the EaP framework with more geopolitical and security-oriented tools, there are several practical steps that could be implemented to support Belarusian civil society actors.

Recommendations

- **Support civil society and media operating inside Belarus and abroad.** This step seems obvious yet it is vital. Belarusian civil initiatives in the country exist in isolation, there are limited ways of channeling financial resources to them, and activists live under the risk of imminent repression. In such circumstances, the diaspora and activists who operate abroad could preserve Belarusian civil initiatives.
- **Extend support to Belarusians who had to relocate to the EU or EaP countries.** Belarusians have demonstrated that they can efficiently self-organize, establishing solidarity funds financed by the diaspora worldwide that help victims of repression as well as networks that help exiles to find employment and adapt to life abroad. Belarusians are not just passively waiting for external help. However, there is room for assistance via social integration projects and the provision of psychological and legal assistance to those who survived torture or had to escape persecution, who now find themselves with little to no personal belongings, seeking employment, and having to deal with bureaucracy in their host country. What is

more, relocation per se does not guarantee safety, with some activists being followed by the Belarusian special services and receiving threats. The most dramatic incident concerned the death in Kyiv of Vital Shishov, a Belarusian activist, which raises questions as to the possible involvement of the Belarusian or even Russian special services.³ The EaP framework is not necessarily expected to solve such personal security issues, yet any step that encourages social integration, building people-to-people ties, or providing legal assistance could be helpful.

- **Help to keep Belarus the focus of international attention via EaP multilateral venues, such as the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly and round tables.** The EaP has the ability to amplify voices from Belarus. Speaking about Belarusian civil society, monitoring the human rights situation, and highlighting personal stories helps to shape the media discourse and reaches the general public and the policymakers of the EU and the EaP countries.
- **Integrate Belarus into the digital transformation agenda.** While the digital component of the EaP is intended for collaboration with the governments of the partner countries, there should be a way to involve Belarusian experts and NGOs in this field instead. For the regime in Minsk, digital sovereignty and strategic thinking about the safety standards around 5G networks or subscribing to the foreign digital infrastructure projects do not seem like priorities. On the contrary, the government tends to practice “digital Leninism” and censorship. It would likely agree to offers coming from other authoritarian states to develop questionable digital infrastructure. Raising awareness around digital sovereignty issues and introducing EU best practices around digital security, such as the necessity of screening foreign investments in critical digital infrastructure, should be aimed at the Belarusian think tank and ICT experts, to build this knowledge for the future.
- **Recognize that the promises of the Lukashenka regime have little worth.** As of today, any rapprochement with the regime looks unthinkable, yet there are voices that call for establishing a channel of communication to de-escalate the situation, in particular the migration crisis. It is important to draw on the lessons of dealing with the regime previously and not to buy promises of liberalization, which were made multiple times during Lukashenka’s rule. Civil society was allowed to operate more freely, only to later become a target for repression, and political prisoners were used as a matter of bargaining with the EU. Similarly, the migration crisis shows how EU projects to support Belarus’s border infrastructure did not stop the regime from turning the border issue against the EU.

³ <https://preview.mailerlite.com/c6j9y9>