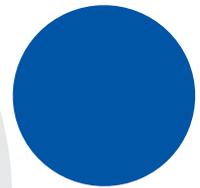




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Saving what
can be: what the
Eastern Partnership
could (still) bring to
Belarus



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Abstract

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) failed to draw Belarus any closer to the EU. Sliding back into authoritarianism since the last rigged election of Alexander Lukashenka on 19 December 2010, Belarus illustrates the limited outreach of the EU's soft power over reluctant neighbours. Equally uninterested in EU accession and in democratic reforms, the regime could hardly embrace European values for the sole sake of taking part in a project which, from its viewpoint, is a "partnership" in name only.

Yet scrapping the EaP altogether would amount to throwing the baby out with the bath water. In fact, the EaP aroused considerable hopes in Belarus, sparking off initiatives which, if implemented, could in practice benefit the Belarusian population. More importantly, given the freezing of their bilateral relations, the EaP is currently the only platform for resuming EU cooperation with Belarus. While signs multiply on the economic and social front that the foundations of "Europe's last dictatorship" are shaking, the EaP could also be the best available tool to accompany Belarus' transition to a post-Lukashenka era.

This, in turn, requires from the EU a piece of strategic thinking for defining its geopolitical objectives in the "shared" neighbourhood. Bypassing old dilemma and addressing the economic and geopolitical challenges Belarus is facing requires a paradigm shift. The paper thus advocates adding a "third", pragmatic track to the EU's policy toolbox for resuming cooperation with Belarus *as a country*, that is to say with all those interested in system change, if not yet regime change. Under the flagship of the EaP, this renewed partnership should follow a comprehensive roadmap towards a modernisation through liberalisation.

An instrument of mindset rather than regime change, the EaP readily offers capacity-building tools able to catalyse positive change in Belarus. No attempt at democratising the country can succeed without the prior autonomisation of civil society however. The EU should therefore focus its efforts on empowering civil society organisations (CSOs) and institutionalising platforms for their socialisation in the European family, starting with the EaP Civil Society Forum. This should help CSOs mediate the EaP project inside Belarus and prepare the ground for politically reforming the country.

Provided that it can engage in a structured dialogue with the authorities, in the framework of roundtables and in the prospect of the 2012 parliamentary elections, the Belarusian National Platform to the EaP CSF could play a pivotal role for translating the EaP offer into practical guidelines acceptable for the most reform-minded segments of the Belarusian bureaucracy. Anticipating future changes, the West's "shadow" action plan on Belarus that remains to be drafted should thus also try and reach out to supporters of changes *within* the regime.

Belarus in/and the Eastern Partnership?

Eight years after the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched it appears that the EU's ambition to turn its neighbourhood into a "ring of friends" sharing "everything but institutions" with the EU remains unfulfilled. On the Eastern front, none of the six neighbours targeted by the Eastern Partnership (EaP), save for Moldova, displayed any sign of genuine democratisation since the initiative officially took off in May 2009. Following the last rigged re-election of Alexander Lukashenka on 19 December 2010, Belarus lapsed steadily back into authoritarian habits.

Given the country's woeful democracy credentials, including Belarus in the EaP was from the onset a controversial issue, and arguably a premature decision. For Poland, its participation was a vital condition for the success of the Eastern dimension initiative, especially after Minsk had snubbed earlier offers to join the ENP. An *idée fixe* of Polish foreign policy, although not a shared objective of member states (Marin 2011a), snatching Belarus out of Russia's grip was actually a key geopolitical goal underpinning the EaP. The task would be difficult though, considering Russia's own "soft power" in its post-Soviet backyard (Popescu and Wilson 2011) and the limited outreach of the EaP in Belarus altogether.

The country is allowed to take part only in the EaP's multilateral track. Yet, cooperation with the five other Eastern Partners within this format had some added value for the Belarusian regime, since it reinforced its coalition-building efforts ahead of the EaP Summit in Warsaw: notwithstanding pressures from the organisers, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan refused to back the Joint Summit Declaration if it included a paragraph condemning Belarus.¹

Ironically, the country least involved in the EaP was also the one which, in ordering its delegation to leave the Warsaw Summit to protest "discrimination", almost ruined the party. Amid this umpteenth row, both Brussels and official Minsk declared that Belarus remains part of the EaP. This shows that both parties appear ready to resume dialogue, a first step towards a hypothetical normalisation of their bilateral relations. This time however, Brussels should be cautioned against returning to "business as usual".

Firstly because the starting point for this reset would once again be a blackmail embarking the EU in the morally condemnable "trading" of political prisoners. In conditioning the resumption of dialogue upon their release and rehabilitation, while at the same time laying a €6,7bn worth draft aid package on the table, in Warsaw Europeans sent the same signal as in October 2008 and November 2010 – that they can bargain over their values. This would leave Lukashenka the upper hand for defining the terms of his mutual accommodation with Brussels in the future.

Secondly, the EU should take advantage of the moment when Lukashenka's popularity is shrinking, including among his traditional supporters and "clients" within the bureaucracy, to identify agents able to promote (and eventually conduct) positive change from within the regime (Jarábik 2011a). For over a decade the West has bet heavily on the opposition, with little result other than that of irritating the regime and fuelling a "grant-seeking" mentality within opposition circles (Jarábik 2011b). The EU should now seek to catalyse its "soft", transformative power through additional channels. Considering the widespread discontent with Lukashenka's handling of the current socio-economic crisis, the EU should thus try and reach out to the most reform-minded among the disappointed elites as well (May 2011).

The main added value of the EaP's multilateral track resides in the network governance and socialisation mechanisms that it entails for the EU's partners. Hence, the EaP platform could help mobilise potential agents of change once delaying reforms will have become unsustainable. An instrument of mentality rather than regime change, the EaP cannot replace the strategy that the EU urgently needs to design if it indeed wants to end Lukashenka's diktat. In the perspective of a now foreseeable post-Lukashenka era, however, "preparing the groundwork" for rooting democracy in Belarus should be a priority (BelarusWorkingGroup 2011). The EaP can help catalyse such a change in supporting the autonomisation of the civil society sphere.

This is but one of the policy recommendations contained in this paper, which ambitions to highlight what in the EaP framework is worth saving. The workability of the initiative being marred by the EU's ill-defined conception of "partnership", a paradigm shift is essential for opening new avenues to draw Belarus closer to the EU. Overcoming old dilemma of inclusion/exclusion, this "third" track (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase 2009) – a prag-

1 As a result, representatives of the EU and member states expressed their "deep concern at the deteriorating human rights, democracy and rule of law situation in Belarus" in a declaration annexed to the Joint Eastern Partnership Summit Declaration adopted on 30 September.

matic partnership with Belarus as an independent and functional country, if not yet a democratic one – would help Belarus liberalise, learning good governance practices in the process. The road might be a long and uncertain one, but in taking it the EU would at least yield results in the field of “partnership-building” (Korosteleva 2011).

A promising... but limited partnership

Belarus is an exception in the EaP because its participation in the initiative has been limited from the onset. In the absence of contractual relations with the EU,² the political constituent of the bilateral track (towards the conclusion of an Association Agreement) is closed to Belarus. The latter cannot start negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) either, since, like Azerbaijan, it does not meet the precondition of WTO membership.³ Visa facilitation is a faraway prospect as well, due to the Commission's reluctance and the fact that it received a mandate to start negotiating an agreement with Belarus only in February 2011.⁴ Lastly and to its great displeasure, the Belarusian regime has also been left out of the EaP inter-parliamentary assembly (EURONEST).⁵ Therefore the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) is currently the only institution Belarus is fully entitled to take part in.

This leaves official Minsk but the multilateral track of the EaP, which innovates in that it encourages horizontal cooperation across borders and sectors, albeit entailing much narrower opportunity for EU funding.⁶ Content with the symbolic gesture, Belarus initially met the prospect of foster-

ing regional cooperation in the EaP with enthusiasm. The government invested considerable effort to make the most of its participation in ministerial and sectoral meetings, especially within platforms 2 (economic integration and convergence with EU policies) and 3 (energy security). The whole bureaucratic machinery was mobilised to design ambitious projects defended in Brussels with conviction and noteworthy professionalism.⁷ Policy dialogue on customs, integrated border management and law enforcement issues developed quickly, as did cooperation for fighting smuggling and illegal migration. Belarus' involvement in technical dialogue with the Commission brought about some level of approximation in the fields of environment, agriculture, norms and standards.

The ruling elite's interest in the EaP was mainly motivated by the hope that external donors would fund big transport, energy and infrastructure investment projects. Developing business contacts also ranked high on the government's agenda and several SME-related projects were indeed implemented. The technology transfers that Belarus desperately needs to modernise its industry failed to materialise however.

Since enhanced regional cooperation was seen in Minsk as a chance to reduce dependence on imports from Russia, much was expected from the EaP to diversify Belarus' energy deliveries and develop North-South transit capacities. The Belarusian government, which was then envisaging importing crude oil from Venezuela, turned to its Lithuanian and Ukrainian homologues with a proposal to draft a sort of Baltic-Black Sea transport axis. In September 2010 they came up with five priority projects: the extension of the Odessa-Brody pipeline with sidelines to the Mozyr oil refinery; the Viking connection (Odessa-Klaipeda); the modernisation of the Vilnius-Kiev highway and the Minsk-Vilnius railway (as part of Trans-European Network IX) and an integrated regional electricity grid.⁸

A serious misunderstanding as to what taking part in the EaP meant emerged however. The Belarusian authorities had read the Polish-Swedish 2008 initiative and the May 2009 Prague Declaration as an invitation to deepen cooperation with the EU in fields of shared interests *only*: they screened EaP documents to pick what they found satisfac-

2 Following Lukashenka's 1996 “constitutional coup”, the EU froze the ratification of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1995. As a result, since November 1997 the EU's institutional relations with the regime have officially been governed only by GAERC Conclusions.

3 The accelerated integration within the Customs Union makes the prospect of Belarus joining the WTO and getting access to EU markets ever more improbable.

4 Henceforth, Belarusians should not expect a waiving of Schengen visa fees (currently, €60) or easier procedures in EU consulates until 2013 – a discrimination many see as unfair and running counter to the EU's claim of wanting to encourage people-to-people contacts.

5 The issue of the composition of Belarus' delegation was actually the bone of contention that delayed the formal launching of EURONEST until May 2011.

6 Funds initially promised to Belarus (€20 to 40mIn “depending on progress”) were 4-6 times less than for South Caucasian partners, 10 times less than for Moldova and almost 24 times less than for Ukraine.

7 Interview with an EU official, EEAS, Brussels, 15 September 2011.

8 Interview with an official of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Minsk, 8 July 2011.

tory, leaving the rest aside (Melyantsou 2011). Yet, irrespective of the 2009-2010 “thaw” in EU-Belarus relations, EU conditionality suddenly seemed to apply not only to political dialogue, but also to multilateral cooperation. Their disappointment culminated in 2011 upon understanding that conditionality had surreptitiously come to prevail over “joint ownership” – another founding principle of the EaP and the only one complying with Belarus’ vision of cooperation with the EU as one between “equal partners”.⁹

Official Minsk actually criticises the EaP on the same grounds as do policy analysts who denounce the philosophy underpinning the ENP, and the fact that its “conceptual shortcomings” persisted in the EaP (Kochenov 2009; Korosteleva 2011): what partnership can be based on the values, interests and rules of only one partner? However condemnable the “values” the Belarusian regime claims to be defending, ENP ones are undeniably not “shared”. From a Belarusian viewpoint, applying non-candidate countries a principle transferred from the enlargement toolbox (conditionality) contradicts the notion of “partnership” with “willing” neighbours. It denotes a hegemonic, arrogant behaviour, the proof of which Belarus sees in Brussels’ reception of initiatives submitted by “partners”. The fate of the Belarusian proposition to establish an Eastern Development Forum is a case in point: made in the spring 2010, this Belarusian initiative was left unanswered in Brussels.¹⁰

On this as on other issues, EU countries were waiting for Lukashenka to fulfil “his” part of the deal: the presidential elections, a milestone for assessing Belarus’ democratic/good neighbourliness intentions.

Dealing with Lukashenka’s Belarus: back to square one

Breaking with 18 months of cosmetic progress, minimal reforms and good-will gestures, on 19 December 2010 Lukashenka’s regime went back to its authoritarian habits. Notwithstanding the EU’s

promise of an outpour of financial support¹¹ should Lukashenka hold elections in closer compliance with OSCE standards, the vote was neither free nor fair. On election night the anti-riot police violently dispersed a tens of thousands strong crowd that opposition leaders had called to gather in Minsk to protest the predictable fraud. Over 700 people were arrested, including seven of the presidential candidates – three of whom were later sentenced to lengthy prison terms for organising illegal “mass riots”.

The West responded with condemnations and sanctions, with little effect though. Despite efforts at transatlantic coordination,¹² the EU Council did not follow Washington’s tough stance on Belarus and delayed until June the adoption of “targeted restrictive measures”. Likewise, the EU’s “gradual” response to the crackdown failed to include a number of innovative measures suggested by the European Parliament already on 20 January. Time being of the essence in coercive diplomacy, especially towards a regime whose compliance is motivated mainly by economic rationales (Portela 2011), Lukashenka kept a head start.

The following months, the policed regime intensified its crackdown on opponents, unleashing an unprecedented wave of repression of opposition parties, human rights activists, civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media. Similarly abusive methods – excessive violence, intimidation, politically motivated judicial sentences – were used for cutting short a “Revolution through the social network” which took hundreds of silent protesters to the streets of most Belarusian cities each Wednesday evening in June and July (Marin 2011b). The EU responded by intensifying sanctions and hammering its message that resuming dialogue with official Minsk was contingent upon the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners. In August Lukashenka started pardoning the Decembrists and figurants of the protests.

Against this background, the worst case scenario came true in this dark year 2011 for democracy: Belarus receded into dictatorship and isolation, with Lukashenka firmly holding both his population and the EU hostage. In the light of previous election year marathons, the outcome is predictable however: Lukashenka needs to court the West again

9 Interview with a spokesperson of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Minsk, 7 July 2011.

10 Interview with EEAS and Belarusian officials, Brussels, September 2011. An EaP Business Forum eventually convened in Sopot on 30 September 2011, but as a joint initiative of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Confederation of Private Employers, co-organised by the Brussels-based BusinessEurope network. From Belarus a delegation of 30 businessmen, headed by the deputy minister of economy, was invited to attend.

11 The “carrot” – a pledge of € 3bn in 3 years – was delivered by Foreign Ministers Radoslaw Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle during their visit to Minsk on 2-3 November 2011.

12 On 23 December Hillary Clinton and Catherine Ashton adopted a rare joint statement condemning the situation in Belarus.

for securing an IMF loan. His serenade is likely to follow a familiar score: offering *minor* concessions (mercy does not amount to rehabilitation) and distributing *false* promises, for example of holding democratic elections in 2012. This time however the EU seems aware that Lukashenka's manoeuvres are deceitful.

Dealing with the enduring Belarusian dictator has for the past 15 years caused Western democracies a case of conscience: what is the appropriate amount of "soft" and "hard" conditionality measures for including the Belarusian people in European dynamics while at the same time excluding its leadership from the European family? Inherent to the ENP project (Pełczyńska-Nałęcz 2011), in the case of Belarus this dilemma has durably undermined the consistence of the EU's values-based message.

Following a decade of defiance between Brussels and official Minsk, in 2004 the EU accession of three of Belarus' direct neighbours pushed Brussels to rationalise its approach. It adopted a two-tier tactic – isolating the regime, and engaging with the people of Belarus – but failed to design a comprehensive strategy. This problem remained after the 2008 legislative elections, when Brussels admitted that whiplashes having failed to teach Lukashenka good manners, biscuits would tame him.

Accelerated by the rebalancing of powers that the Russian-Georgian five-day-war imparted to European geopolitics, this U-turn resulted in the inclusion of Belarus in the EaP – even if the regime had satisfied few of the EU's 2006 conditions¹³ – but not in the drafting of a proactive action plan on Belarus. When it appeared last 19 December that Lukashenka had again mislead the West and fore-runners of the "critical engagement" policy had lost the face, all heartbrokenly returned to dual-track policies. Even if the latter now seem to be bearing fruits, this approach does not address the fundamental issue of what a *common* stance on Belarus should be (Marin 2011a).

Acknowledging that Lukashenka cannot embark on the path of reforms without damaging the very foundations of his power, no sticks or carrots could ever turn him into a democrat. A by-product of the changes in Minsk's relations with Moscow (Jarábik

and Silitski 2008: 114), Lukashenka's foreign policy will remain pragmatically Machiavellian. The latest developments even illustrated the superiority of his "dictaploMACy", whereby a calculated step towards or away from the EU ultimately serves but his personal interest: consolidating his hegemony at home while at the same time asserting his power of nuisance in the face of lesson-givers abroad. Hence all frontal attacks on his very person are doomed to fail.

New challenges: a chance to break the deadlock?

Most people tend to believe that Lukashenka is, therefore, the central problem preventing the democratisation/Europeanisation of Belarus. In fact, the dictator is but a reflection of problems that will remain after he is gone. Although the most pressing problem is undoubtedly the unreformed, Soviet type of governance that still prevails in the country, the issue of how geopolitics constrains its foreign policy choices will not relapse easily either.

Landlocked between what it perceives as two equally imperialistic blocs, Belarus cannot "chose" the Western (EU) vector at the expense of the Eastern (Russian) one. Lukashenka's attempts at finding a way out through "multi-vectorness" is but a vain rhetoric: two-vectorness and the need to balance between East and West – looking for an alliance, but never giving allegiance – will remain a structuring feature of Belarus' foreign policy.

Asking Belarus to make a civilisational choice in favour of democracy implies an inextricable security dilemma. With at least five integration platforms currently on offer – the CIS, the Russian-Belarusian Union State, the Eurasian Economic Space, the Common Security Treaty Organisation, the Customs Union and possibly a "Eurasian Union" in the future – the Russian vector looks more attractive than the EU's for Belarus (Popescu and Wilson 2011). Yet many Belarusians share with their leadership an interest in a mere economic, good-neighbourly partnership with the EU (Rotman and Veremeeva 2011: 88). Should they wish to *politically* integrate with the EU however, given Russia's unwillingness to let go of Belarus – especially under the assertive rule of Vladimir Putin, who will predictably come back to the Presidency next spring – such a choice might exacerbate tensions between Russia and the West.

13 In November 2006 the Commission issued a non-paper enumerating 12 conditions for restoring dialogue with official Minsk (Commission 2006). By October 2008 the latter had fulfilled but two of them (releasing political prisoners and re-allowing the circulation of two opposition newspapers), whereas the 28 September Parliamentary elections had failed short of meeting European standards of democracy and transparency.

For now this geopolitical reality reflects in opinion polls: even if a majority of Belarusians (45,1% in June 2011) would vote for Belarus' accession to the EU and a stable third against it,¹⁴ when asked to chose between four options (EU accession, in a union with Russia, both, or in no union at all), in mid-2010 over 28% "would rather live in the EU and in an union with Russia simultaneously" (BISS and NOVAK 2010: 22). However unrealistic, this innovative positioning illustrates the Belarusians' desire for a compromise solution that lets them remain true to themselves – an independent, neutral nation living in harmony with its neighbours, as goes the mantra.

Another sociological feature that partly results from Lukashenka's clumsy nationalistic propaganda is the attachment to Belarus' sovereignty. Henceforth, the EU should not overestimate the power of attraction of its governance model, not to mention that of its values: the former is not a panacea, whereas the latter remain "alien" to an average Belarusian (Korosteleva 2011: 11). Yet, at this point the EU should consider sending Belarus a strong signal that they share at least one value: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Over the past months alarmist statements have spread regarding one probable consequence of the economic crisis Belarus is facing: the threat of an economic takeover by Russia. Indeed, the accumulation of macroeconomic imbalances – dwindling currency reserves, a worrying current account deficit (16% of GDP), an abyssal foreign debt (expected to reach 75% of GDP), rampant inflation (prices rose by 80% since last December) – have constrained the regime to reach out to Russia for emergency assistance (BelarusWorkingGroup 2011: 14). Moscow made it clear however that it will not subsidise the Lukashenka system without compensations: Belarus will have to pay "in kind" for its credits, by selling up to \$9bn worth of state-owned assets.

The prospect of Russian oligarchs raiding Belarus' industrial base, spreading "wild" capitalism practices, dirty money and corruption on the way, is causing panic among Belarusians. The regime may still have safety net resources to "feed" and keep its loyal social basis quiet. Constrained by indebtedness however, Lukashenka will not hesitate to sell out his country's assets, adopt the Russian rouble and follow Moscow's instructions – thereby giving

up Belarus' sovereignty to foreign interests.

Although the seriousness of the crisis should not be overestimated – Belarus' export-oriented economy is resilient, and after all the Eurozone is also running in the red – Moscow's contempt for Belarus' statehood should prompt Brussels to take a decisive step: throw in the promise of investments and credits to save the country from annexation. Belarusians will have to pay for their salvation in conducting the long-delayed structural reforms that can make their economy competitive, a concession that might turn into a popular injunction should Moscow's appetites grow.

Which leads us to a second script also changing in favour of the EU: with the king-pin of Lukashenka's paternalistic system (the alleged "Belarusian economic miracle") about to break, his popularity is shrinking to historical lows. According to another NISEPI survey conducted last September, the share of respondents who consider Lukashenka personally responsible for the crisis rose from 44,5 to 61,2% over the summer and only one in five voters would now cast his ballot for him. For the first time ever, a majority of respondents (35,2%) expects improvements after he resigns.

Lukashenka has no intention of stepping down however, favouring instead a North-Korean, hereditary-type of power transfer. Alternative scenarios (an electoral victory of the opposition or a popular revolution) are very unlikely in Belarus. No opposition leader stands out to benefit from disenchantment with Lukashenka (support for the opposition hardly reaches 20%), whereas a popular upsurge remains a highly improbable scenario.¹⁵

This leaves but the prospect of a "palace coup", a conspiracy Lukashenka is surely equipped to foil. Yet, constrained by other contingencies – the threat of a humanitarian crisis or Russian absorption – he might envisage picking a successor among his most loyal followers or appointing a team of technocrats to conduct the minimal reforms able to save the economy from collapse, and his own skin in the process. Looking ahead, the EU should strive to convince him and his supporters that such a negotiated transition is the optimal option and that any alternative development model would entail a backsliding into autarky and oblivion.

14 Quarterly figures provided by the Vilnius-based Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (NISEPI). The most recent polls rare available on www.iiseps.org/press15.html.

15 The proverbial apathy of the Belarusian people is reflected in surveys: the share of Belarusians ready to mobilise and protest has remained at a stable low (between 10 and 14%) for the past decade.

Time for a paradigm shift: opening a “third” track

What should the EU do now? The recipe advocated hereafter derives from discussions with dozens of Belarusian and foreign policy analysts, stakeholders and practitioners and hence it reflects one point of view currently debated in the expert community.

Given that Lukashenka runs his country “as a peasant would a kolkhoz”, the only way for the West to make a renewed engagement offer intelligible and attractive enough is to present it as a “perestroika” of sorts and label it a “partnership for modernisation”.¹⁶ The EU must demonstrate its willingness to accompany the advocated reform process by providing advice and support for liberalising the country’s economy, rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all lesson of democracy. The deal should not be seen as interference, else Lukashenka will discard it as an outright toppling attempt or one more “colour revolution”. In fact, the EU should present its offer as an upgrade towards a *real* partnership based on shared interests. The EU would gain more leverage with a “less politicized, less prescriptive and more technically driven” approach (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase 2009: 157) than if it sticks with a conditionality-based governance perspective which obviously contradicts the notion of partnership, especially since double standards prevail in the selective, not to say hypocritical application of conditionality to various Eastern Partners (Marin 2011c)

Of course, in returning to the initial partnership spirit of the EaP initiative, Brussels runs the risk of giving Lukashenka a chance to present the shift as an EU weakness. Henceforth, Brussels should widely advertise its gesture as one directed at Belarus *as a country*. The wording is crucial here: should the initiative look like the EU is trying to connect directly with “the people of Belarus”, like in the Commission’s 2006 non-paper, Lukashenka will surely counteract to assert that no one can bypass him. Knowing his psychology, one should rather leave him the latitude to present the idea of a renewed partnership as his own. This would actually allow the EU to enhance its profile in Belarusian public opinion, while triggering support again for the EaP within state administrations.

Launching a “partnership with Belarus (as a country)” would open the EU a long-awaited “third” track (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase

2009), thus overcoming the deadlock inherent to the dichotomy between exclusion (of the regime) and inclusion (of civil society). The EaP readily provides a conceptual and practical framework for implementing the advocated “modernisation through liberalisation” deal. A paradigm shift to a “tri-track” strategy would not only solve the Gordian knot of how to relate to Belarus: it would prepare the ground for “de-Lukashenkisation”.

In this perspective, the renewed partnership should develop following a *technical* roadmap for modernisation. Since the launching of the EaP, “roadmap” and “flagship” have become catchwords able to *horizontally* mobilise all possible levels of governance in Belarus – ministries, regional administrations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), economic circles, etc. Should they operate on the basis of feasible conditionality criteria, shared interests, jointly set goals, clear benchmarks and mutual accountability, partnership roadmaps could catalyse the EU’s soft power in Belarus through *praxis* instead of prescription of democracy.

What it takes to engage the Belarusian bureaucracy in such a negotiated transformation is convincing (or, at worst, constraining) the Belarusian leadership to allow, in each sector in need of *structural* reforms, legitimate representatives from civil society – which includes but does not limit itself to opposition leaders – to sit at the EaP negotiations tables. The EU should be an intermediary in this process, guaranteeing that CSOs may participate in policy decision-making and implementation, monitor approximation processes and evaluate the progress made, with an opportunity to contest and correct things when they move away from the roadmap.

This recommendation derives from the assumption that in an authoritarian state the autonomisation of *non-* and *sub-*state actors is a prerequisite for democratisation. The regime has a point when it claims that Belarusian society being a conservative one due to its peasant and Soviet-collectivist background it is not mature for democracy yet.¹⁷ Where accumulated challenges might prove Lukashenka’s supporters wrong however, is that in forcefully delaying socio-economic liberalisation as well, they make Belarus run into a wall. The EU should thus step up efforts to convince Belarus as a country – which until further notice includes them – that the EaP can help prevent this from happening.

16 Interview with an ex-member of the Public-Consultative Council of the President’s Administration, Minsk, 6 July 2011.

17 Interview with a spokesperson of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Minsk, 7 July 2011.

The way forward: catalysing change through civil society

One innovation of the EaP multilateral track was to give a voice to actors from beneath and outside of the Partners' governmental structures. For Belarus, where administrative autonomy and civic activism are taboo, this was a windfall.¹⁸ Civil society organisations (CSOs), especially those serving as a facade for unregistered opposition movements, immediately seized the chance.

Initially an informal institution of the EaP architecture, the Civil Society Forum (CSF) offered Belarusian civil society a platform for exerting its right to exist, criticise, make proposals... and *structure* itself. The participation of Belarusian CSOs in the Forum has been outstandingly dynamic and purposeful. This is quite logical given that no avenue for high level cooperation with the EU had ever been available for them, less so with the tacit agreement of official Minsk. Not only did the Forum give Belarusian CSOs a voice in the EaP: their voice was the loudest of all national delegations in the Forum, owing in part to the fact that a Belarusian has held the co-presidency of the Forum's Steering Committee since its foundation two years ago.¹⁹

At the first EaP CSF Forum (Brussels, 16-17 November 2009), Belarusians submitted a majority of the projects (76 out of 439, ie. more than projects from Georgia and Moldova together).²⁰ From the onset their involvement oriented the CSF's development from an ornamental caucus into an agenda-setter for EaP processes. In 2009 the Belarusian delegation coined the notion of "National Platforms" (NPs), assigning them the duty of representing CSOs in Brussels and monitoring the efforts of their respective governments to meet the objectives set by the EaP.

At the second Forum (Berlin, 18-19 November 2010), the Belarusian NP coined the idea of appropriating the Commission's "roadmap" rhetoric in recommending that CSOs draft their own

EaP roadmaps. Belarusian CSOs came up with in-depth analyses of the state of affairs in sectors they are most concerned with (local government, media freedoms, labour legislation, cultural diversity, research, etc.) and assessed the needs the EaP should help them meet and how. They also advocated an "open method of coordination" for evaluating the advancement of approximation processes in Belarus.

More than any other National Platform to the Forum, the Belarusian NP saw in the EaP a driving belt for structuring and coordinating the survival strategies of pro-EU, independent, democracy-oriented – and therefore harassed – CSOs back in Belarus. This, however, proved extremely difficult to achieve in the "civil war" conditions Belarusian CSOs have to cope with at home (Vadalazhskaya and Yahorau 2011). The situation deteriorated in 2011 with Belarusian authorities obstructing several of the NP's meetings in Minsk.

Another negative trend is the recent corruption of the National Platform by GONGOs which will thus make their way to the upcoming CSF Forum (Poznan, 28-30 November 2011).²¹ In deciding to transform the NP arena into a formal structure with a mandate extending beyond EaP issues, some CSO which ambition to use the NP as a political campaigning platform within Belarus proper will surely provoke the ire of the authorities, while at the same time heightening division within the opposition.

Unless the Commission proactively "empowers" and defends pro-EU CSOs, they will be further put on the sidelines of EaP processes and Belarusian domestic politics alike. The efforts expected from Brussels to prevent this marginalisation are three-fold.

Firstly, the Commission should *institutionalise* the EaP Civil Society Forum. This requires granting the CSF "permanent participant status in official platform meetings, thematic working groups, expert panels and flagship initiatives", with a right to preview draft EaP documents and access information about EU financial support flowing to national budgets – resources and access without which the CSF will be "a watchdog condemned to bark outside the room" (Vialichka 2010). The efficiency of the EaP CSF Steering Committee would also increase should its administrative workload be transferred

18 It is too early to assess the participation of Belarusian regional authorities in the other decentralised institution established by the EaP, the Conference of regional and local authorities for the EaP (CORLEAP), which held its inaugural meeting on 8 September 2011 in Sopot.

19 In 2009 the president of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs of Belarus Siarhej Mackievich was elected as Forum's spokesperson and co-chair of its Steering Committee. The following year, the Forum again designated a Belarusian, Ulad Vialichka (the chairperson of the International Consortium EuroBelarus) to co-direct the work of the CSF.

20 The number of projects submitted by Belarusian CSOs increased to 94 in 2010 and decreased to 77 in 2011 (yet this year only the Azerbaijanis submitted more projects than the Belarusians did).

21 The NP comprises a variable number of CSOs (about 150), but only a quota of 30 is entitled to participate on a rotating basis in the yearly EaP CSF Forum. The more GONGOs join the NP, the better they can enforce the state's lobbying, sabotage and diversion tactics. Interviews with CSO representatives, Belarusian National Platform meeting, Minsk, 6 July 2011.

to a Brussels-based secretariat that CSOs have long been calling the Commission to establish.

Secondly, the Commission, EU member states and EaP donors should aim at increasing, re-targeting and “de-bureaucratising” the *funding* allocated to Belarusian CSOs. Although Belarus is the Eastern Partner which received the most funds from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR),²² grants do not necessarily reach NGOs. Funds are often pre-empted in the process by EU-based NGOs, Belarusian public administrations or the same “grant-seekers” (Jarábik 2011b), whereas bureaucratic hurdles disqualify or discourage the weakest NGOs. As for the potential to fund non-registered NGOs it remains under-exploited due to the lack of knowledge of EU Delegations (Řiháčková 2010: 2-3). Another shortcoming of the EIDHR is its streamlining to prioritise the human rights agenda, at the expense of civil society capacity-building. Retargeting funding (from the political opposition to CSOs), simplifying application rules and making re-funding procedures more flexible should therefore be a priority (*ibid.*).

Thirdly, the EU should commit itself to *mediating*, if at all possible in Belarus, a dialogue between CSOs and the authorities. Although the very idea of a dialogue divides CSOs and the opposition – hence the limited support of the community for the “Strategy 2012” (Vadalazhskaya and Yahorau 2011) – the prospect that the roundtable Lukashenka suggested to hold²³ is indeed convened should prompt CSOs to unite forces and participate with convincing propositions. Under the flagship of the EaP, the EU Delegation in Minsk could play a pivotal role in mediating the trilateral dialogue between the government, civil society and external democracy-sponsors.

22 In 2007-2010, Belarus received over €6,2mln-worth of EIDHR funding (out of the 25,5mln available for EaP countries), of which 3mln earmarked for the European Humanities University exiled in Vilnius (Łada 2011: 2)

23 On 29 August, commenting on the “clapping and yelling on squares” during a meeting with Belarusian pedagogues, Lukashenka invited “all sensible people who love their country, regardless of their political affiliation, to sit down at a table, whether round or square, and (...) objectively assess each other’s ability to improve the [economic] situation”. He solemnly invited representatives of the EU, Russia and international financial institutions to attend these discussions (BelTA news agency, 29 August). On 9 September however, Lukashenka declared that his offer had been wrongly interpreted as a readiness to engage in negotiations with the opposition.

Guidelines for a renewed partnership

Summing up, supporting the autonomisation of civil society should be the main objective of the EU’s policy on Belarus, one that the EaP can indeed contribute to fulfilling. Institutionalising the EaP Civil Society Forum should be the Commission’s first short term priority, in the perspective of the Poznan Forum. In the medium-term, the EU should design a “shadow” action plan to empower Belarusian CSOs, so that they become efficient agents of change. A potential mediator of the EaP offer within the country, the Belarusian National Platform could be supported in its attempt to proactively participate in domestic politics.

Provided that Lukashenka releases *and rehabilitates* the 11 remaining political prisoners – a condition the regime, seeking to regain Western favours, might fulfil soon – upon resuming dialogue with official Minsk the EU should make its financial support conditional upon the launching of a structured and future-oriented dialogue between state structures and civil society. All other EU requests, such as holding the 2012 Parliamentary elections according to OSCE standards, are illusory. For a political democratisation to even start in Lukashenka’s Belarus, the ground should first be favourable for the autonomisation of a civil society sphere.

On technical EaP issues Brussels should try and reach rapid progress on ongoing negotiations, without resorting to the “sticks and carrot” rhetoric: the driving force should rather be a shared liability to save the country from economic collapse and Russian takeover. Upon revising the EaP or “de-freezing” the Joint Interim Plan for Belarus it drafted a year ago, the EU should open a “third” track for relating to the country. This new paradigm could actually be applied in the future to relations with other “badly-governed” neighbours aspiring to no more than *economic* partnership with the EU.

Building on the assessment that the roadmap scheme has sparked off constructive initiatives at all governance levels in Belarus, the EU should rely on this particular scheme to help the country draft a realistic agenda for reforms. This “partnership for modernisation” would accompany the negotiated liberalisation of the economy, triggering further changes in terms of good governance. In this as in other fields, the EaP can deliver. The EU can use it to publicise benchmarks and encourage exchanges of best practices within thematic platforms and EaP flagship projects. Anticipating the fall of Lukashenka, the offer should, however, be extended to Belarus “as a country”.

Democratisation being a “learning-by-doing” process, the best way for Belarusians to practice democracy is through socialising in Europe, rather than in participating in procedural (electoral) democracy farces. Therefore, the EU should keep its own word and open its borders to Belarusians, who are currently discriminated in the Schengen area. Likewise, Belarusian civil servants should be entitled to benefit from the EU’s institutional capacity-building instruments, training and exchange programs (Marin 2011c). Given the growing number of Belarusians now dissatisfied with Lukashenka’s policies, this would allow the EU to reach out to tomorrow’s bureaucrats who will implement the now unavoidable reforms. One of the objectives of the EU’s “shadow” action plan on Belarus should therefore be to identify among the ruling elite the individuals it can rely upon for moving on towards system change.

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Center for Analytical Initiatives of the "Liberal Club", Minsk
Eurobelarus International Consortium, Minsk and Brussels
Office for a Democratic Belarus, Brussels
Eastern Europe Studies Centre, Vilnius

List of interviews, by institution

EU-related institutions

European External Actions Service, Brussels
Delegation of the European Union to Belarus, Minsk
Representation of Lithuania to the European Union, Brussels
Representation of France to the European Union, Brussels
Eurochambers - Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Brussels
Belarusian National Platform to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Minsk

Belarusian governmental bodies

Integration Department of the Chief European Directorate and Information Directorate of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Minsk
Mission of the Republic of Belarus to the EU, Brussels

Belarusian research institutes and advocacy networks

Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, Minsk
Centre for European Transformation, Minsk
Foreign Policy and Security Research Center, Minsk

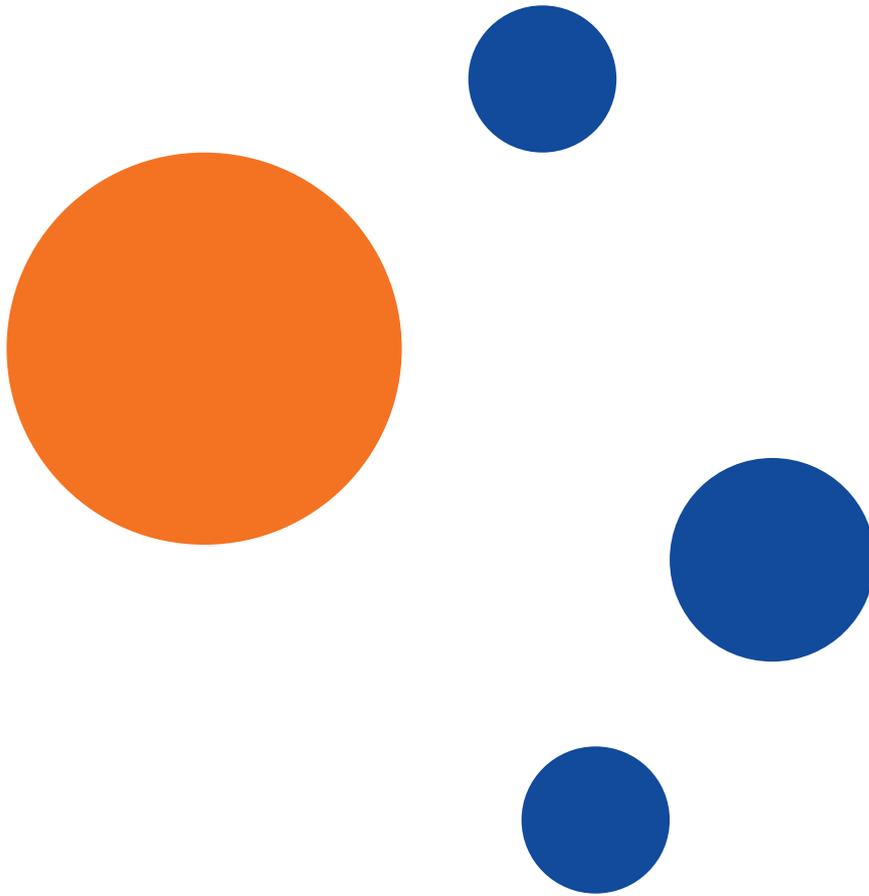


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