

A Cautious Reset of Belarus-EU Relations in the Making?

On 9 September the EU High Commissioner for Foreign Policy Federica Mogherini stated that the EU should "not to miss a new window of opportunity" in relations with Belarus after Alexander Lukashenka's decision to pardon six remaining political prisoners.

Although the West remains cautious, waiting for the outcome of the October presidential elections, this round of a warming in relations may indeed lead to a new format of interaction.

If the electoral campaign is calm, Minsk and Brussels have a good opportunity to launch fruitful and pragmatic cooperation in various important fields like trade, freedom of movement, investment and education. So far slow engagement seems the only realistic way to gradually Europeanise Belarus and balance Russian influence.

Lifting Sanctions? Not So Fast

After Lukashenka's "[act of humanism](#)" many Western governments have unequivocally welcomed this step. Many analysts were expecting the quick removal of European sanctions, but Brussels has taken a pause before doing so.

The first high-rank Western official who visited Minsk after the political prisoners' release was Gernot Erler, the German government coordinator for the Eastern Partnership and Russia. He reiterated approval of Lukashenka's step but emphasised, that the EU was not going to revise sanctions before the elections scheduled for October 11. Erler stated that sanctions expire on 30 October and said that the EU member-states had "neither plans, nor grounds for reviewing them

beforehand".

Later, the head of Belgium MFA Didier Reynders and Federica Mogherini stated the same: no revision of sanctions before elections.

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This delay may disappoint the Belarusian authorities whose only motivation to release the political prisoners was [to improve ties](#) with the West. However, the EU's implied rationale seems reasonable, it can be called "2010-syndrome".

During the 2008-2010 reengagement between Minsk and Brussels the situation looked similar: Russia scared its neighbours by intervening in Georgia, the Belarusian government distanced itself from the Kremlin's actions and released political prisoners. Contacts with the EU became more intensive and, finally, Brussels froze sanctions.

In 2010 many hoped Belarus was sincerely opening up to the West. A brutal crackdown on mass demonstration in Minsk on election night followed by 700 protesters being detained and more than 40 sent to jail ruined those hopes. The EU was widely shamed for naivety and had to reintroduce tough sanctions in 2011. These events rolled back relations to the lowest level in a decade.

Now, the West seems to be more cautious, leaving itself leeway in case the elections do not go smoothly.

More Cautious Promises

In 2010 Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski was straight-forward when he visited Minsk with his German colleague on the eve of presidential elections. He simply promised €3 billion in exchange for a non-fraudulent and open

campaign.

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Currently, EU diplomats (including Mogherini) are using cautious language, mentioning a possible "reset" in relations with Minsk if the [OSCE monitors'](#) report after the elections is "positive". Gernot Erler told journalists about a possible "substantive political dialogue in this case. He also named some concrete opportunities: in the case of "fine" elections the EU can lift sanctions, foster the visa facilitation process, support Belarus' application to WTO and help organise a large investment conference in 2016 together with Minsk.

Also, before the political prisoners release, European diplomats in private talks confirmed the existence of a special internal EU document providing tens of concrete proposals to Minsk. To "activate" this road map the major obstacles of political prisoners and sanctions were to be removed.

Besides the points mentioned by Gernot Erler, this set of proposals allegedly included trade facilitation measures, a sizable increase in technical assistance, new education opportunities (in the framework of the [Bologna process](#)) and other rather pragmatic steps. Minsk also seems particularly interested in EU assistance for placing Belarusian bonds on the European stock exchange.

Finally, Jean Asselborn, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister currently holding the EU rotating presidency, on 5 September revealed that the EU was working on a new kind of agreement with Belarus and Armenia "to prevent all bridges being burnt". These two members of the Eastern Partnership showed little desire to sign the association and free-trade agreements with the EU. Hence, treaties with them will be "of a lower level", with no customs privileges but containing "a lot of other

things", the Luxembourg Foreign Minister said.

New Format Seems Feasible and Promising

To enable this optimistic scenario in Belarus-EU relations two factors have to coincide: calm elections and more or less positive OSCE report, noting at least minor progress. Both conditions remain rather fragile given the Belarusian regime's lack of plans for true political liberalisation and its unpredictability when it comes to public protests, which December 2010 showed.

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On the other hand, some prerequisites for this scenario exist. The readiness to protest in Belarusian society has [fallen significantly](#) after the Ukrainian crisis. Thus, the government may not need to resort to repression in the [absence of a serious threat](#).

As for the future OSCE report, the Belarusian authorities have [done their best](#) to score some points in the eyes of foreign observers. These efforts include inviting a maximum number of Western monitors, equipping many polling stations with transparent ballot boxes and providing relatively free conditions for opposition to campaign.

The authorities have demonstratively refrained from punishing opposition activists for unauthorised protest rallies in central Minsk, which is surprising for Belarusian politics. Although these measures do not change the essence of the controlled electoral process, they may well be highlighted as improvements in the OSCE report which the West hopes for.

If the European Union responds with visa liberalisation, more

educational exchanges, more EU technical assistance and investments, it would strengthen the pro-European segment of Belarusian society and within the government. Together with possible Western loans and [joining the WTO](#) these measures will help create a more healthy environment in the Belarusian economy and provide a balance to Russian influence.

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At the same time, it looks like this potential new format of relations with Belarus will be designed not to irritate Russia: something "lower" than association agreement which caused the initial tensions between Moscow and Kiev back in 2013.

Additionally, the restrained language and pragmatic agenda will hardly cause a lot of false expectations and disappointments between parties. It happened in cases of Georgia and Ukraine: both of whom hoped for EU membership perspective or, at least, visa-free regime, but have received none of the two so far.

Given the existing political system in Belarus, [Russian dominance in the economy](#) and media space and a currently assertive Kremlin's foreign policy, this "small-steps strategy" seems to be preferable. Any true Europeanisation of Belarus and its people remains unlikely without [building new bridges](#) with united Europe.