

Breakout from isolation? What to expect from Lukashenka's visit to Brussels

On 9 October, Belarusian media reported that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka received an invitation to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Brussels. The development demonstrates a new high in the pragmatism of EU policy towards Minsk. A formal end to the isolation of the Belarusian leadership has come despite the lack of human rights progress.

Lukashenka will most likely use the occasion to reinforce his new image as a donor of regional stability. However, this diplomatic breakthrough does not automatically imply tangible progress in relations with Brussels. The political thaw, so far, has failed to produce economic results or improve Belarusians' attitude towards the EU. Such shifts require bold domestic reforms, and Minsk seems reluctant to undertake them.

EU pragmatism at its peak

Several different sources, including the EU delegation in Minsk, have now confirmed that Alexander Lukashenka personally received an invitation to come to Brussels for the [EaP summit](#) in late November. On 17 October, European Neighbourhood Policy Commissioner Johannes Hahn will visit Minsk, reportedly, to pass on the invitation personally to Lukashenka.



Johannes Hahn (left) in Minsk in 2015. Photo: www.ec.europa.eu

Due to a strained relationship with the EU, the Belarusian president has not represented his country at any of the four past EaP summits. Brussels issued the same invitation to all six EaP member countries, but unofficially asked Belarus to please send someone other than the Belarusian president.

The [thaw in EU–Belarus relations](#), which started in 2015, has become, inter alia, a manifestation of Brussels' new, more pragmatic foreign policy towards Minsk. An increasing importance of regional stability and security, Belarus's [neutral stance](#) on Ukrainian crisis, and its peacemaking efforts have all had a strong effect on this EU policy shift.

Belarus still does not participate in EaP's parliamentary dimension, Euronest, but the invitation for the president to visit Brussels overshadows this lingering drawback. This autumn, Belarus will formally and symbolically become a partner, the leadership of which EU recognises equally legitimate to those of other Eastern neighbours.

This represents quite a remarkable leap from “the last dictatorship of Europe” label, especially considering how limited the [democratic progress](#) in Belarus has been. Human rights groups, like Viasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, still report about political prisoners (currently they name three). In terms of freedoms of media and assembly, the situation has recently worsened with a new wave of pressure on the [Belsat TV channel](#) and arrests of opposition activists.

These developments, however, have caused no visible damage to the Minsk–Brussels rapprochement. Indeed, inviting Alexander Lukashenka to the EU capital is not simply one step further. With such a decision, Brussels clearly flags the victory of the “pragmatists’ camp” over “value-advocates” within the EU. There are simply no powerful actors, capitals or groups of interests left to root for a hard line towards Belarus.

Minsk will try to consolidate diplomatic gains

Belarus has not yet confirmed Lukashenka’s visit to Brussels, but it is already clear the pros outweigh the cons.

For the potential fruits the Brussels trip may bear, Lukashenka can put up with a dozen protesters near the EU Council building or occasional criticism from European colleagues. The overall positive atmosphere in Belarus-EU relations minimizes the potential magnitude of these “dangers.”

Lukashenko will unlikely be afraid of irritating Russia with his visit. The recently held joint [military games Zapad-2017](#), despite Western [criticism and worries](#), was a timely and appeasing pro-Russian gesture. These exercises made it easier for Lukashenka to defend his Brussels trip were Russia to

raise issue.

On the pros side, the Belarusian president will get a serious reputational uplift from his visit to the EaP summit. For the first time in two decades, he gets a chance to come to the EU capital and take an equal seat at the table with key European leaders. Belarusian diplomats will do their best to arrange as many bilateral meetings as possible.

Lukashenka will likely present himself triumphant—a leader who managed to break out from Western isolation, sacrificing no power domestically and imposing his pragmatism upon relations with the EU.

Brussels will also act as a prestigious forum for Belarusian president to reiterate his Helsinki-2 initiative. The idea is to gather USA, EU, China and Russia to discuss a new world order, preferably—in Minsk. In addition, Lukashenka will not miss an opportunity to remind all in attendance of his role in facilitating negotiations on Ukraine.

The potential and ceiling of engagement

A limited and relatively superficial agenda remains the fundamental problem of the EU-Belarus thaw in relations. For now, progress after Brussels seems feasible in terms of [visa facilitation talks](#) and the launch of negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which will create a legal basis for cooperation between Belarus and the EU.

The Belarusian Foreign Affairs Ministry has complained often lately about the lack of a modern legal basis for developing relations with the EU. Ironically, Lukashenka made his first, and so far only, visit to Brussels in 1995 to sign the first Framework Agreement. The EU suspended its ratification after

the Belarusian referendum of 1996, which consolidated authoritarian rule in the country. Lukashenka's new visit to Brussel seems the perfect occasion to kick off new talks on this issue.



Photo: Reuters

Visa facilitation will hardly be achieved by simply visiting Brussels. The talks have been stuck in bureaucracy for several years now. At the same time, a loud and joint reiteration of both Belarusian and EU political will to conclude talks on a new visa regime may speed up the process.

Apart from this, the Belarusian diplomatic breakthrough will remain purely diplomatic. Naturally, this can contribute to a steady improvement of the country's image abroad, but this slow process will hardly lead to a tangible breakthrough in relations.

The origins of the ceiling to engagement go well beyond the usual stumbling block—Belarusian authoritarianism. For example, the dynamics of EU–Belarus trade follow oil prices and not political developments. Refined Russian oil constitutes up to 70 per cent of Belarusian exports to the EU and Minsk has done little to change this trade structure. The

share of trade with EU in terms of Belarus's overall trade balance is just 23 per cent (January–August 2017). The figure was above 26 per cent even in 2014, a year before Minsk and Brussels began to normalise their ties.

[Foreign investments](#)—two thirds of which come from Russia and offshore territories—have been shrinking since 2014. They also depend on the existing business climate within the country, rather than upon symbolic victories on the diplomatic front.

Even public opinion in Belarus has not responded to the thaw in relations. Among EaP nations, Belarusians are the least positively disposed citizens towards the EU—35 per cent ([EU Neighbours survey, April 2016](#)). Less than 15 per cent of Belarusians chose the EU over Russia as an integration option in a spring 2017 poll conducted by Belarusian Analytical Workshop, a Belarusian think tank registered in Warsaw. This figure has remained below 20 per cent since 2014, the year massive anti-Western propaganda efforts began in the Russian media. They still keep informational dominance in Belarus with no countermeasures from its government.

The limits of the Minsk-Brussels dialogue and its effectiveness depend on political and economic homework that Belarusian authorities remain reluctant to do. Diplomatic achievements pave a good road for a palpable progress in relations, but they cannot replace it.