From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis

Belarus is returning to the international spotlight, but for once, not just as the “last dictatorship in Europe”. The two summits that Minsk hosted in the past year on the conflict in east Ukraine indicate a tentative shift in Belarus’s political alignment.

Yaraslau Kryvoi and Andrew Wilson analyze what the West should do in relation to Belarus in a paper produced jointly by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Ostrogorski Centre.

Although Belarus was more of a broker than a genuine neutral party at the negotiations that produced the two “Minsk Agreements”, the government has profound doubts about Russia’s assault on its neighbour’s sovereignty.

But despite some changes in rhetoric, Belarus is not adjusting its foreign policy because it wants to change itself. Instead, Lukashenka wants to preserve his system from Russian pressure. But recent moves to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty and nationhood risk undermining his traditional method of balancing between the West and Russia.
Lukashenka’s current overtures to the West differ from those he made in the previous period of tentative engagement in 2009-2010. That engagement ultimately failed because of the uneasy balance within a twin-track policy, with Belarus seeking foreign policy insurance against Russia by making token moves towards softening authoritarianism. This time, the second track is different. If the West seeks to engage, it will be by supporting Belarusian statehood, not by encouraging a putative domestic mini-liberalisation.

The EU has two ways to respond, either based on geopolitics and concern about Russia, or based in an effort to strengthen Belarusian society in the longer term. Both would drop the conditionality approach of “more for more” in all but name.

The EU would confine itself to supporting Lukashenka’s policy of adjustment towards Russia, but without expecting fundamental change inside Belarus, and without taking steps that might make relations with Russia even worse.

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A more productive approach would be focused on Belarus itself, and would renew the policy of “engagement” without the unrealistic hopes of 2009-2010. The EU would offer to assist in a more modern form of nation building, one that would gradually empower civil society from within. The possibility of fomenting a quick regime change in Belarus has been unlikely since at least 2006.

The policy of engagement with Belarusian society recommended here would not be inconsistent with retaining individual visa bans and targeted sanctions imposed as a proportionate response to political imprisonment.

So, instead of criticising the regime from the sidelines, this approach would aim at patiently increasing if the EU’s presence in Belarus. The focus should be not just on human rights, but more broadly on the rule on law, not so much on quick political changes but more on good governance and fighting corruption. Without a presence on the ground, the EU has no bargaining power.

Such an approach would entail four main strands of EU activity:

- The EU should help to strengthen statehood and national identity politics as well as to counter the Russian propaganda machine.
- The EU should engage more across the board: in the first place, with civil society, which should ultimately create more demand for sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law in Belarus, but it should also interact more with the bureaucracy at all levels.
- Europe should provide indirect economic assistance: conduct a dialogue on economic modernisation and help with WTO membership and with expanding the role of the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.
- The EU should encourage stronger cooperation between
Belarus and Ukraine, to ease Russian pressure on both states.

Countering Russian propaganda will be one of the most important tasks. The EU needs to confront aggressive anti-Western propaganda, which comes primarily from Russian media outlets in Belarus. Making independent media more accessible by means of increased and more effective trans-border TV, FM radio, and internet broadcasting would lead to more demand for democratic change.

At the same time, Belarusians should be given better access to information about the EU, its history and values. Although the EU has a Representative Office in Minsk, much more should be done to promote the EU at universities (for example, by organising public lectures, exchanges, and essay competitions) or for the wider public through civil society organisations. The EU needs to continue supporting Belsat TV, which is based in Poland, but it also needs to go beyond that and empower local voices from within.

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In the past, the West has focused on educating human rights and opposition political activists about the EU and its values. But the Belarusian bureaucracy, the most influential group in Belarusian society, has much less understanding of the EU; it mainly gets its information from Russia-dominated media.

Brussels should increase its work in experience transfer and should intensify educational programmes for officials (particularly the younger ones), focusing not on general geopolitical contradictions but on practical technical regulations, standards, and procedures. By engaging officials at all levels in meaningful cooperation, the EU will stimulate appetite for reforms in Belarus.
The EU has paid insufficient attention to the role of national identity in Belarus. For instance, the European Humanities University in Lithuania, one of the largest donor-supported projects, has slowly drifted from being Belarus-focused to catering for a larger group of Russian-speakers in the former Soviet space. However, without the development of a stronger national identity, Belarus could easily become a part of Russia, particularly after Lukashenka is gone.

Civil society groups should be supported, but so should the cautious steps of the Belarusian authorities, who are afraid to anger the Russian nationalists now dominant in Russia. This support should take the form not just of moral encouragement but also of concrete long-term programmes. This is one of the areas in which the interests of the Belarusian authorities, civil society, and the EU coincide.

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Lowering the visa barrier by decreasing visa fees and making them free for many categories of Belarusians would also strengthen pro-European sentiment in wider Belarusian society, as would developing business and civil society contacts.

Currently Belarus receives more Schengen visas per capita than any other country. But most of these visas are issued for only a few days or months, forcing Belarusians to submit repeatedly to expensive, tedious and sometimes humiliating visa procedures. The EU should issue more multiple-year visas for Belarusians who have a good history of travelling to the EU. This should become a rule rather than an exception.

The EU's scholarship programmes, such as the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians, should be expanded to include exchanges of PhD students and academics. However, it is not enough to help young people leave Belarus and study...
at Western universities. It is equally important to create fellowship programmes to support Western-qualified Belarusians in returning to their home country to work in education, public sector, or policy-oriented organisations. That would address Belarus’s need for Western expertise and alleviate the brain-drain problem.

Although the Eastern Partnership has largely failed to reach its objectives on Belarus, it is important to keep Belarus involved even just as a formal member of this club, to enable it to cooperate with Ukraine and other countries of the region on matters of mutual interest. Clearly, the current Belarusian leadership remains uninterested in the prospect of joining the EU, which means that it has a very different motivation to leaders of countries such as Ukraine. This means a more individualised approach is needed.

Finally, many of the problems Belarus faces are similar to those of Ukraine. This should lead to the encouragement and funding of cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine at all levels (state and non-state), including common research initiatives, grant programmes, and exchange schemes for academics and policymakers.

- Read full paper From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis.
- Чытаць цалкам Ад санкцый да самітаў: Беларусь пасля крызісу ва Украіне

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