

Opinion: Why the Eastern Partnership Fails to Reach Belarus

Although formally a member of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), unfortunately Belarus does not participate in any of its programmes. It is excluded from visa liberalisation, the EaP flagship initiatives, and bilateral track programmes: for example, the Small and Medium-Size Enterprise Funding facility with a €15m budget, or the Eastern Partnership Pilot Regional Development Programmes with an allocation of €75m. It is worth mentioning that for 2010-2013, in total around €350m have been set for the Eastern Partnership programmes.

The Eastern Partnership programmes have been implemented since 2008, and during that time there has been a so-called period of liberalisation in Belarus. But civil society's expectations of an improved situation have not been fulfilled. Minsk ignored the EU's recommendations regarding democracy, the observance of human rights and an independent judiciary. Full cooperation with Belarus is impossible for Europe without political changes and the release of its political prisoners.

Because Belarus does not participate actively in any of the EaP initiatives, it does not receive any of the resources from the EU that are designated for the development of the Eastern Partnership. Belarus is losing great opportunities. As a result resources go to the other five partner-countries within the EaP. In other words, others benefit from the opportunities lost by Belarus.

The Diplomatic Conflict Is a Conflict of Values

The complex situation which Belarus is in has now been further complicated following the departure of European ambassadors

from Minsk. The present conflict is a conflict of values which is difficult to resolve. It is the confrontation between the EU's commitment to a values-based approaches with regard changes in the country's, and the aspiration of the Belarusian authorities to retain absolute power and their wish to get different bonuses from their foreign partners.

The Belarusian authorities impudently wanted to threaten the EU and make it reverse its position on sanctions. However, the effect was the inverse: Europe has shown solidarity and was not afraid to say "no". The following conciliatory statements of the Belarusian authorities testify that they did not expect such conduct from Europe.

Belarus Faces a Geopolitical Imbalance

For the general public it is hard to be aware of the result of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership. It has not brought any evident benefit that could be seen by the people. At the moment Russia "supports" Belarus. The question is what Belarus will do when its "support" ends. Receipt of Russian financial injections means technological backwardness, poor management, and the decline of entrepreneurship, and it needs to be stopped. People should live according to their own minds and their own work, and not receive free money for making declarations of geopolitical love.

The abolition of the visa regime with EU countries may be the most evident way to tackle such imbalance. That would enable Belarusians to actually experience Europe through something other than the lens of official propaganda. It would also entail better access to education: it would be easier to attract foreign specialists to the country. Though we cannot bring an extra sausage to every home in Belarus with the Eastern Partnership, we can pave the road to a better life in future.

EU Policy Needs Consistency

The question is whether the restrictive measures against Belarus are effective or not. Sanctions have done neither serious good nor serious harm. Everything has stayed as it was. But when the Western stream narrowed, the Eastern broadened. The necessary resources are coming from the East. Because of the sanctions, Belarus faces a geopolitical imbalance.

The most negative aspect of sanctions is the inconsistency of their implementation. That was the case with the 12 conditions for engagement with Belarus demanded by the EU which were first presented in November 2006. In 2008 the number of those conditions was reduced to “democratic elections, the freedom of expression and of the media, and the freedom of assembly and political association” and periodically had been disappearing from the agenda only to “emerge” from time to time. It is high time that the EU developed a coherent approach to Belarus and stuck to it.

There is no doubt that the best proof of the Belarusian authorities’ intentions to come to the negotiating table regarding cooperation would be the release of political prisoners. This would be a clear signal for everybody. In Belarus such a decision depends on the desires of the very few and that is why it can be made at any time.

As for the Eastern Partnership, the main task of the National Platform of EaP CSF is to help interested civil society bring Belarus back to the European path, and implement European standards in daily life. For me, as for the national coordinator, it is important that we Belarusians use the opportunities offered by the Eastern Partnership.

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