

Belarus Stays Outside EU Enlargement Agenda Even in Theory

The European Union has committed to the long-term strategy of integration of the Balkan states of former Yugoslavia and Albania as its members. At the same time Belarus remains untouched by European integration. This means that the EU border remains a border dividing Europe. The rationale behind Western Balkan states' integration into the EU is geographical and geopolitical: the countries are already de-facto surrounded by the EU. Unlike Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, there is no alternate integration pole for the Balkan countries. They are unlikely to establish a block among themselves nor join some third non-European integration project. Slovenia has been the first country of former Yugoslavia to join the EU in 2004.

All other countries of the region have either applied for membership (with Croatia being in the vanguard of the process) or are at least officially considered candidates. This comes despite a history of deep internal problems and even recent civil wars, like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia. Even Kosovo, which is not officially recognized by five EU member states, is considered a potential EU candidate. Belarus is effectively not at all part of the process of the European integration despite being culturally and historically probably even closer to Western Europe than some of the Balkan states. Belarus is economically stable (although badly reformed) and ethnically homogeneous, which is not the case with some of the Western Balkan countries.

What Belarus and Northern Africa have in common The European Neighborhood Policy puts Belarus in the same row with countries of Northern Africa or the Middle East which

radically contradicts the aspects of history and culture. The Eastern Partnership has been a step forward but its effectiveness is still questionable. Poland and the Republic of Lithuania are among the traditional advocates of Belarus' eventual integration with the EU given the countries' [historical and cultural ties with Belarus](#) and their unwillingness to be the union's border states. Until the 20th century there has hardly ever been a border between what are now Poland, the Lithuanian Republic and Belarus.

Now the border between them is sometimes seen as a border between "Europe" and "Eurasia". Opinion polls show that approximately half of the population of Belarus is in favour of the country's EU integration. Both the opposition and, since recently, the officials strive for Belarus' closer cooperation with the EU. At the end of the day, it is still a question to be discussed whether Belarus should indeed become a full member of the EU and expose itself to burdens of the Union's bureaucracy and over-regulation. But Belarus' formal joining of the European Union is not the issue itself. The problem is that the border of the EU is a border separating Belarus from the most of the continent and thus a border dividing Europe which is seemingly not the way it is being seen by the EU itself. The European Union and the public opinion there tends to identify the words *Europe* and *EU*, which is a mistake.

European identity versus Realpolitik It is not only the fault of the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka that Belarus is not quite regarded as a European country in the West. Spain, Greece and Portugal have had even more repressive regimes until the 1970s which has never crossed out them out of Europe. The democratic and increasingly westernized Georgia has in the last years showed strong adherence to values claimed to be European and commitment to European integration. Despite that, it is treated by the EU in virtually the same way as the undemocratic Belarus, with hardly any membership

perspective foreseen. Some observers claim that relations with Russia are of higher priorities for the EU than relations with countries like Belarus or Georgia. Therefore Brussels would rather prefer leaving the countries in Russia's sphere of influence instead of responding to their desire for European integration.

If the EU wants to be based on a European identity and not on Realpolitik and fossil fuels, it has to treat Belarus in a different way from the Asian and African neighbours of the EU. This does not necessarily mean giving extra material support for some pro-EU initiatives of the Belarusian opposition. Even less should it mean ignoring the Belarusian authorities abusing human rights. This primarily means for the EU itself to learn to perceive Belarus as an indivisible historical and cultural part of Europe – which Turkey, Algeria or Azerbaijan are not. Read more on the EU's policy towards the Balkans at rferl.org

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