

How EU money stimulates Lithuania-Belarus border cooperation

On 30-31 January, the heads of the Lithuanian town of Panevezys and the Belarusian one of Vitsiebsk met in Minsk. At present, with relations between the two governments [poisoned](#) by the dispute over the Astraviec nuclear plant, such local-level relationships take on added importance.

Both countries would like to develop cooperation in promoting tourism or improving border security, not only for internal reasons but also because the European Union (EU) pays for such cooperation. The EU can go further by making the distribution of money under its transborder program more proportional, improving regulations and, finally, liberalising the visa regime.

If you handle a lot of money and need to count large amounts of money, the best option is this [amazon money counter](#) to ensure that the amount is correct.

The reason for border cooperation

Difficult border procedures between Belarus and Lithuania first emerged 15 years ago, when Lithuania completed its negotiations to join the EU. For many residents near the border that day proved tragic because it divided relatives in neighbouring villages. Until then the region lacked real boundaries – neither during Russian/Soviet rule, nor in the days of the Grand Duchy.

For example, in the Lithuanian village of Rakai,

inhabited primarily by ethnic Belarusians, many used to work in Belarus. Only in 2003 the recognition of a real border meant they needed to look for a job in Lithuania or move to Belarus.



The location of Rakai

Often people from the same family, who had lived all their lives within several kilometres of each other, found that they needed an expensive and complicated visa and take a lengthy detour to reach the nearest border crossing point, only to sometimes face a long queue at the border checks inside the

next country.

The border affected not only families but also economic relations. For example, in 2018 the Lithuanian Carriers Association announced that trucking companies lose €100,000 each day because of the queues at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. The capacity of the border crossings is simply failing to receive the flow of truckers.

Naturally enough, culture, tourism and [common history suffered as well](#).

EU as a sponsor of cross-border cooperation

The truth is that without EU money the countries would make much fewer steps towards each other, as both are pretty poor and may have other priorities. At the meeting in the Lithuanian embassy in Belarus, the heads of Panevezys and Vitsiebsk discussed the European Neighbourhood Instrument for Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. The program budget for 2014-2020 amounts to €81 million, of which EU funds account for €74 million.

In 2007-2013, during the previous program, more than two hundred Belarusian, Latvian and Lithuanian organisations built or renovated around 150 sites and held over 300 events. Thanks to the EU funding, common tourism routes appeared, journey time on the Vilnius–Minsk train fell to just two and half hours, joint youth football camps took place, and firefighters from the three countries organised field exercises. On the whole, 57 projects received €37 million.

The funds under the current program aim at: the promotion of social inclusion and the fight against poverty; the support of local and regional good governance; the promotion of local

culture and preservation of historical heritage; and the promotion of the border management and border security.

Budget of the 2014-2020 Cross-border Cooperation Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus Programme



- Promotion of social inclusion and fight against poverty
 - Support to local and regional good governance
- Promotion of local culture and preservation of historical h...
 - Promotion of border management and border security
 - Technical Assistance

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Despite being listed last, border issues are not less important; they usually consume the largest amount of money. Without the assistance of the EU, all the existing border infrastructure in this region would have looked obsolete. At the same time, the number of visitors between the two countries keeps growing. Even Belarus, which is [hardly attractive to tourists](#), issued 73 thousand visas in Lithuania during 2017. Furthermore, Lithuanians also enjoyed a visa-free

regime in Hrodna and when entering Belarus through Minsk airport.

Belarusians and Lithuanians visit each other's countries for goods and services that are cheaper or better. For example, some Belarusians prefer to give birth to children in Lithuania, while Lithuanians go to Belarus for dental services.

How can the EU help?

Brussels could do a few things that can make cross-border cooperation more effective. In 2017 the monitoring committee of the programme Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus selected 30 projects for funding. Among them, only two projects have Belarusian organisations as the lead beneficiaries. In all the others, as insiders told *Belarus Digest*, Belarusian organisations play a secondary or even marginal role. For example, as guests at workshops in Lithuania or Latvia.

According to Belarus's ambassador to Lithuania, the problem lays in the fact that "Belarusian organisations have difficulties to work with European funds, but this will change with having more experience and improving the regulations inside the country." The European Commission could have paid more efforts to ensure that programme funds get distributed more proportionally between participating countries, even if the current disproportion has some objective grounds.

The EU can continue to invest in border infrastructure, but in fact, the reason of traffic jams hides in the regulatory hole. Truckers who travel across Poland have the right to import 200 litres of diesel fuel at a time, while there are no such restrictions in Lithuania. Therefore, many truckers choose the route via Lithuania and the solution to this problem requires a joint decision.

Also, the EU should finally liberalise the visa regime with Belarus. Lithuania is not only [a mecca for parties](#) of wealthy Belarusians, but also a place where poor Belarusians have their families, whom they cannot see due to high visa costs.

At the end of the day, while the political elite quarrel, communication between the people could bring communities closer together.

Eastern Partnership Summit: the Results Can Encourage Lukashenka

The results of the second summit of the Eastern Partnership say nothing new about the EU policy in Belarus and in Eastern Europe. As always, the EU leadership is busy with internal problems. In light of the financial collapse in Greece and the major financial problems in Eurozone countries, one should have not expected allocation of additional large sums on Belarusian issues for Eastern Partnership projects.

Rather, the summit confirmed that the development of cooperation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership will move very slowly. Fundamentally, the Eastern Partnership is still a deferred project for the EU.

The host of the summit Prime Minister of Poland Donald Tusk after his meeting with representatives of the Belarusian opposition said: "From our side there will be no concessions, no gestures of any kind towards Lukashenka's regime until all political prisoners are released".

There was not much discussion at the summit about what steps Lukashenka's regime should make to normalize its relations with the EU. The EU has already got used to the thought that normalization of relations was impossible while Lukashenka is in power. The real question was about taking some very small steps to change the current situation in relations for the better to some extent.

EU President Herman van Rompuy, urging the Belarusian authorities to establish dialogue with the EU, said: "We cannot support Belarus without seeing apparent progress in regard to respect of human rights in this country, and it means immediate release and exculpation of all political prisoners".

Statements by the representatives of EU bodies and member states implied that currently the EU demands towards Lukashenka's regime are limited de-facto to the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners. It was not specified, however, what is meant under the rehabilitation.

Donald Tusk also announced at the final press conference of the summit that its participants had approved a "Modernization Package for a Democratic Belarus". The package foresees a possibility of extending grants and loans to Belarus by international institutions, investment stimulus and mechanisms for the stabilization of the Belarusian currency, and the simplification of the visa regime.

According to the Prime Minister of Poland, the EU is ready to extend up to nine billion dollars to Belarus in exchange for the fulfillment of certain conditions: full amnesty and exculpation of the political prisoners, opening of negotiations with opposition and holding the parliamentary elections in accordance with the OSCE standards.

One gets the impression that Tusk voiced the maximum demands to Lukashenka's regime, and the EU does not really believe

that they can be met.

At the final press conference, the EU President also said that the release of the political prisoners was the first condition for resuming cooperation with Belarus.

Belarus' ruling elite still does not see much of a 'carrot' in the Eastern Partnership projects and other EU proposals, or anything worth pushing Lukashenka to any significant steps towards the EU and the West and intensifying the internal dialogue on expanding cooperation with the EU.

Currently, the demands of the EU to carry out democratic reforms and to hold the parliamentary elections in accordance with the OSCE standards enter are in contradiction with the interests of the ruling elite. In Belarus, the process of the carving-up (appropriation) of a significant part of state property is gaining momentum. The nomenklatura needs its own convenient laws, its parliamentarians, judges and mass media in order to keep competitors both the West and Russia out of Belarus.

The figure of nine billion dollars, announced by the Prime Minister of Poland, is so far the biggest promise from the West (if the EU is indeed ready to allocate this amount). But it is still less attractive compared to what the nomenklatura can get as a result of the carving-up of a significant part of state property.

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Belarus at the EaP Summit in Warsaw: The Meaningless Scandal

The main reason why the second ever Eastern Partnership Summit made it to the headlines of some Western media was a Belarus-related scandal. Otherwise, the Warsaw event got extremely poor coverage by leading news agencies. That clearly points to the low priority of the Eastern Dimension in the European Neighborhood Policy and the absence of any eye-catching agenda. Had a new Belarus-related scandal not happened, the Summit would have been a total bore.

So what happened in Warsaw? The Eastern Partnership Summit is meant to be the top mechanism for making fundamental strategic decisions. It is held bi-annually and brings together the leadership of the states and institutions of the EU and the leaders of the East European partners (EaP-6) – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, the organizers of the Summit in Warsaw were supposed to invite all those heads of states. And they did so, with one exception: Belarus.

Since Alyaksandr Lukashenka is on the EU sanctions list and is banned from entering the European Union, he received no personal invitation. Instead, the organizers invited foreign minister Syarhey Martynau as head of the Belarusian official delegation. This very circumstance, apparently, brought some psychological discomfort to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In the Belarusian political system it is considered unacceptable to establish and develop any official (and, even more so, unofficial) contacts avoiding the president.

It should be noted, however, that Lukashenka would not have gone to Warsaw even if he had received an invitation. As in

2009 when the First EaP Summit took place in Prague, he would have appointed someone from among the top bureaucracy (for example, Minister Martynov) as head of the delegation. But in the situation of 'no invitation for himself,' Lukashenka's political style demanded that he should respond from the position of strength and provoke a new scandal.

As a result, instead of Minister Martynov, Belarusian ambassador to Poland Viktor Haisyonak was appointed head of the official delegation. Now it was the EU's turn to be irritated and they decided not to invite ambassador Haisyonak to the official Summit dinner. They explained his level was not appropriate to sit with the heads of states and governments. After that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus announced that the Belarusian official delegation was leaving the Summit.

Basically, this is the whole story. A typical one in diplomacy. But for some reason numerous commentators began to exaggerate its importance. Therefore, a number of points need to be clarified.

Everything that happened at the Summit makes absolutely no difference to the current and future state of EU-Belarus relations. Had Minister Martynov been present in Warsaw and had no other Belarus-related scandal burst out, the outcomes of the Summit for our country as well as those for the EU would have been exactly the same.

The European Union would have expressed the very same concerns and deplored human rights violations in Belarus. The same conditions for resuming active and open contacts with the EU would have been declared, i.e. that all political prisoners have to be freed and rehabilitated. Polish PM Donald Tusk would have announced the very same amount of resources available for reforms in Belarus in case of positive changes in the country. And this sum would have been just as doubtful as it is now.

Thus, in spite of the recent scandal, everything in current EU-Belarus relations remains intact. Belarus remains very interested in the Eastern Partnership as the only institutionalized platform for regular contacts with the European Union. The EU still has no idea about how to deal with a non-democratic regime which has no intention of reforming itself.

But at the same time the Union needs to preserve and develop contacts with the Lukashenka regime for a number of reasons. First, it really fears the possibility of full Russian political and economic expansion in Belarus. Second, it does not see any alternative to the incumbent Belarusian ruler with whom to talk about practical issues (like, for example, the promotion of business interests). It appears that the promised release of political prisoners in Belarus might serve as a common denominator and bring to fruition this mutual interest in dialog.

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