The Ukrainian Crisis Will Not Harm Belarus-EU Relations

On 10 March the EU Delegation to Belarus organised a conference entitled 'EU-Belarus Sectoral Cooperation: Looking Back and Looking Forward' in Minsk. Belarusian and European diplomats in attendance agreed that the crisis in Ukraine would not affect EU-Belarus relations as they are setting a new agenda for their bilateral relations.

Another rapprochement between Belarus and the European Union seems to be looming large. The upcoming presidential campaign in Belarus, in part, explains the positive tone of the Belarusian MFA. The Kremlin's pressure on its neighbours also has set the stage for the authorities in Minsk to become more cooperative with the EU.

Unusually Positive Tone

The conference, which took place on 10 March, was marked by a decidedly different tone when compared with the previous rhetoric the authorities had been employing with regards to EU-Belarus relations. For nearly two years, in the aftermath of the crackdown on 19 December 2010, both sides have resorted mainly to mutual accusations and ultimatums. At the end of 2012, after Uladzimir Makey became foreign minister, Belarus started to soften its tone. And now an air of positivity has already begun to dominate the speeches of both Belarusian and EU officials.

At the conference, the EU Delegation highlighted the major achievements in their cooperation over the past seven years. The EU granted Belarus about €200 million in technical assistance in 2007-2013. One example of success that was presented was the EU donating €913,000 worth of equipment to Belarus’ State Customs Committee. The aid also helped to build
a biogas plant at a dairy farm in the Minsk region. Additionally, almost 80 Belarusian students received full scholarships to study for undergraduate and graduate degrees at universities across the EU.

Maira Mora, head of the EU Delegation in Minsk, did emphasise during the conference the standing problem of political prisoners. However, she seemed quite optimistic about the future. Among other things, she presumed that the latest events in Ukraine would not discourage Belarus from developing its cooperation with the EU.

Dzianis Sidarenka, who heads the Directorate of General European Cooperation at the Belarusian MFA, generally concurred with Ambassador Mora. He acknowledged that the current state of relations is far below its potential, not in the least because of a lack of bilateral agreements. Sidarenka reminded those in attendance that the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 1996, never came into effect, as the EU failed to ratify it.

New Agenda

Sidarenka also emphasised that the Vilnius Summit of November 2013 opened up new opportunities for future Belarus-EU relations. In particular, he was speaking about the visa initiative that Uladzimir Makey came up with at the summit. Namely, his offer was to begin negotiations on visa liberalisation with the EU.

The offer was welcomed with a good degree of optimism from the EU side, as European diplomats had been willing to start visa talks since the beginning of 2011. Many commentators also saw Belarus’ initiative as a small victory for the otherwise failing Eastern Partnership project.

Two months later the parties started taking some practical steps in the direction of visa liberalisation. On 29-30 January Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna paid a visit to
Brussels where the government of Belarus and the European Commission officially launched negotiations over visa liberalisation and readmission.

The level of determination on the part of the Belarusian authorities in these negotiations, however, remains unclear. So far they have demonstrated their readiness to have the agreements prepared for signing at the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit in the first half of 2015.

Effectively, this means that the negotiations need to press forward quickly and finish before the end of 2014. At best, it will then take several months for the EU 28 member states to shuffle the text of the agreements through the process of internal consultations before signing them.

EU-Belarus relations are finally getting a new constructive agenda

EU-Belarus relations are finally getting a new constructive agenda. The Belarusian MFA made a clever move when suggesting visa talks at the Vilnius Summit. The issue interests several stakeholders (EU, Belarusian business and civil society) and does not bear immediate political risks for the authorities in Minsk. It will also look good for Alexander Lukashenka’s presidential campaign in 2015.

Moreover, the current EU-Belarus agenda looks likely to go beyond visa regime negotiations. During her Brussels visit Alena Kupchina also held a meeting with Commissioner Stefan Fule and Gunnar Wiegand of the European External Action Service (EEAS). They agreed to start talks on general modernization issues. The declared aim of these talks is to identify an optimal format for future cooperation between the EU and Belarus’ government.

Later, another representative of the EEAS Dirk Schuebel stated in a media interview that the EU and Belarus were negotiating
a so-called Interim Stage of Cooperation. Its details have yet to be revealed. Schuebel only said that initially in the Interim Stage both parties would focus on the issues of trade and investment. Thus, it looks like European diplomats are trying to get the Belarusian authorities involved in the European Dialogue on Modernisation, albeit in a slightly different format.

**Elections and Geopolitics**

Rapprochement between the two parties is not, however, occurring without its own set of difficulties. The level of mutual trust remains low. But Belarus' government seems genuinely determined to improve ties with the EU.

The last year and a half saw a significant increase in the number of working contacts between Belarusian and European diplomats in Minsk and various EU capitals. And this trend is continuously growing. Foreign Minister Makey and his deputies are becoming regular visitors to the EU. For example, Makey recently paid a visit to Latvia and Lithuania.

The reasons for intensifying diplomatic activity appear to be twofold.

First is the so-called logic of electoral cycles. To put it simply, the closer Belarus gets to another presidential campaign the more motivated the government becomes to improve its relations with the West. And as elections conclude, this motivation subsides.

In a nutshell, the authorities simply strive to minimise risks during the challenging environment which develops around presidential elections. And they perceive deteriorating relations with the West as one such risk.

Similar developments have occurred in the lead up to a presidential campaign in the past. However, at that time the
authorities initiated rapprochement earlier: more than two years before polling day. And the presidential campaign itself became its culmination.

The longer the relations with the EU remain broken, the more difficult it becomes to withstand Russian pressure.

Second, rapprochement represents the logic of a foreign policy balancing act between Russia and the EU. The longer relations with the EU remain broken, the more difficult it becomes to withstand Russian economic and political pressure. Belarusian diplomats used this exact wording in negotiations with the EU in 2008-2010. Very likely, similar words are have come up in their current closed meetings.

Thus, despite the notable Ukrainian factor, rapprochement between Belarus and the EU will, in all probability, progress at least until the 2015 presidential elections. With this in mind, there is a chance that the Belarusian authorities will release the remaining political prisoners before voters cast their ballots in 2015 or even before the inaugural face-off at the ice-hockey World Cup in Minsk in May 2014.