

Belarus-EU relations: One year without sanctions

A year ago – on 15 February 2016 – the Council of the European Union lifted most of the sanctions against Belarus. 170 Belarusian nationals and three companies were taken off the EU 'black list', which opened a new chapter in Belarus-EU relations. It also signified the end of the cyclical nature of the relations, when each new presidential election would result in another diplomatic crisis.

The post-sanctions year has seen further improvement of the political relations, whereas economic cooperation has been a disappointment. While both sides look determined to continue the rapprochement, the relations still face challenges and no exaggerated expectations should be entertained.

Gradual political rapprochement

The sanctions were introduced back on 31 January 2011 as the EU's reaction to the voting irregularities and violence that accompanied the presidential elections in December 2010. Over the next two years, the relations experienced an intense diplomatic confrontation, which saw some ambassadors leave temporarily for consultations while the Embassy of Sweden in Minsk and Belarus's Embassy in Stockholm closed down.

In September 2012, Uladzimir Makei became Minister of Foreign Affairs. Soon after that, Minsk started attempts to slowly normalise its ties with the West. With the USA, a non-official strategy of small steps (where most problematic issues were left for future talks and practical areas of mutual interest got primary attention) was launched. A less explicit, but somewhat similar approach began to materialise in EU-Belarus relations. However, Brussels (as well as Washington) adhered to a strict position on the issue of political prisoners. Without a formal recognition of them as political prisoners, the Belarusian authorities responded by releasing them. The last remaining ones were freed in August 2015, which became a crucial step for further progress in the relations.

The EU saw the presidential elections of October 2015 as another important milestone. The peaceful nature of the campaign and its relatively non-negative assessment (compared to the previous ones) by international monitors made it possible for the EU to lift most sanctions. Importantly, for the first time in two decades the presidential elections did not result in a deterioration of Belarus-EU relations and even paved way for further normalisation.

The parliamentary elections of September 2016 further strengthened the trend. Again, the OSCE/ODIHR report emphasised that Belarus still has a long way to go to improve its electoral practices, but it also acknowledged some positive changes. Importantly, for the first time in many years, two representatives of the opposition and civil society made it into the parliament's lower chamber.

Another factor that contributed to the EU softening its attitude to Belarus was Minsk's position on the Ukraine crisis. Not only did Belarus take a stance different from that of Russia (for example, Minsk has not officially recognised the annexation of Crimea and has spoken against federalising Ukraine), but it also led an effort to mediate the conflict in the Donbas by providing "good offices" to the conflict parties. Regular meetings of the Ukraine contact group continue to convene in Minsk.

Political normalisation without economic effects

The lifting of the sanctions in February 2016 opened a new chapter in Belarus-EU relations. Yet, due to the previous legacy and structural limitations on both sides, neither Minsk nor Brussels could realistically expect any major breakthroughs to follow quickly. But overall, the year 2016 added positive dynamics, at least, in the political realm.

The level and intensity of Belarus's diplomatic contacts with the EU grew throughout the year. In May 2016, President Lukashenko paid his first visit to an EU capital – Rome – in six years. Foreign Minister Makei and his deputies became more regular guests in the EU. A growing number of European politicians visited Belarus. Perhaps the most symbolic visit took place in November, when Belarus welcomed the Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico, who then held the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

Bilaterally, most active contacts were registered with Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and Italy. Austria opened its Embassy in Minsk. And Belarus inaugurated embassies in Stockholm (re-opened) and Madrid. Noteworthy on the Belarusian side is that a growing number of state institutions, besides the Foreign Ministry, became involved in contacts and cooperation with the EU.

Another significant development was the introduction of the Belarus-EU Coordination Group – a new structured dialogue format, which substituted the previous modernisation dialogues. Two meetings of the group have already taken place and involved representatives of various state and non-government institutions.

Also, the year 2016 saw the continuation of the dialogue on human rights, which received both support and criticism from Belarusian human rights groups. President Lukashenka opined that Belarus needs a permanent dialogue with the EU on human rights, because “this is a problem of economic and deeply psychological nature”. It is also noteworthy that relations with the EU got predominantly positive coverage in Belarus’s state media throughout the year.

However, the positive dynamics on the political level did not yet spill over into the economic sphere. While Minsk has always declared economic cooperation as its top priority in the relations with the EU, trade became quite a disappointment of the first post-sanctions year. According to Belstat, trade turnover went down by 22.3% and amounted to USD 11.2 bn. Most dramatically, Belarus’s exports to the EU fell by 33.7%, while imports decreased by 5.6%. While these developments can be explained by economic factors like the fall in commodity prices and the recession in Belarus, some people were hoping for better results. No significant progress was registered in the investment sphere as well. On the positive side, another step by the EU as a result of the lifting of the sanctions – intensified cooperation with the EBRD and EIB – has the potential to increase cooperation in the future.

Outlook

In spite of the gradual political progress over the last year, Belarus-EU relations continue to face some challenges. The lack of significant economic results is aggravated inside Belarus by the fact that the political elites are not homogenous and proponents of reforms and better relations with the West often need to carry the burden of proof. Thus, sizeable economic results are needed for the relationship to acquire a more sustainable footing. Therefore, Minsk’s main efforts will be directed at economic cooperation.

One related item on Belarus’s EU agenda is the need to start negotiations about a framework agreement. Today, the bilateral relations are still based on the Agreement between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the USSR on Trade and Commercial and Economic Cooperation signed in 1989. Minsk has in effect made the topic one of its official priorities. The issue of visa liberalisation will also remain among bigger items on the agenda. The Belarusian authorities hope that their recent decision to grant visa-free entry to EU citizens (alongside 62 other nations) will demonstrate the country’s international openness and stimulate the finalisation of visa liberalisation talks with the EU.

Minsk will also continue to put effort into promoting all forms of dialogue between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. Such a dialogue would be important

for Belarus for economic and security reasons. It is not surprising therefore that “connectivity” has been selected as the slogan of Belarus’s current presidency of the Central European Initiative.

The new Belarusian parliament can be expected to play a more active role in the relations with the EU, especially if it is invited to the EuroNest – the parliamentary dimension of the Eastern Partnership.

Author

Yauheni Preiherman, minkdialogue@gmail.com

Yauheni Preiherman is Head of the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative and Chairman of Board of the Discussion and Analytical Society Liberal Club in Minsk.

Note: This text is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the German Economic Team Belarus.

German Economic Team Belarus (GET Belarus)

GET Belarus has been engaged in political dialogue with reform-oriented decision-makers from the Belarus government since 2003. It is funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy.

Editors

Robert Kirchner, Dr Alexander Knuth

Contact

German Economic Team Belarus
 c/o BE Berlin Economics GmbH
 Schillerstraße 59, D-10627 Berlin
 Tel: +49 30 / 20 61 34 64 0
 Fax: +49 30 / 20 61 34 64 9
info@get-belarus.de
www.get-belarus.de