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EU-Belarus relations have hit a wall

Why Minsk and Brussels can't boast of successful relations ten years after the launch of Eastern Partnership

Read this article in Russian.

Ten years ago, Belarus, along with other post-Soviet countries, joined the European Union's Eastern Partnership programme. Since then, Minsk and Brussels have been trying to build a relationship that was practically non-existent up to that point. A decade later and the results are, to put it mildly, underwhelming. Why?

For the first five years of Eastern Partnership, Belarus trailed behind. Of all the countries involved, it received the least money. Minsk had no intention of joining the EU, but rather worked on building a customs union with Russia. At the beginning of 2011, relations froze completely after the repression of opposition figures and several waves of European sanctions.

However, in 2014, progress started to take shape. Belarus and the EU began discussing a simplified visa regime; a year later Minsk freed political prisoners and Brussels lifted sanctions. What has actually changed since then? Both parties can take credit for three achievements. Firstly, the EU's financial assistance to Belarus has increased several times over: we're talking tens of millions of euros per year going into border modernisation, green initiatives, educational projects and much more.

Secondly, two major European banks have been authorised to become fully operational in Belarus. They are undertaking projects worth hundreds of millions of euros and increasing these sums year after year. The money is being spent on infrastructure, roads, municipal services, promoting business and even privatisation.

Finally, and this may seem trivial, Belarus and the EU have learnt to communicate. Never before has there been such stable, profound dialogue between Minsk and Brussels. Both parties have launched several platforms aimed at discussing various issues – human rights, trade, customs – and another dubbed the 'steering group'.

The limits of cooperation

But for the most part the success ends here. The most obvious sign is Lukashenko's refusal of two invitations to travel to Brussels. Vladimir Makei, who has represented Lukashenko at summits, explained that the president currently has no reason to visit. In fact, it's evident that Lukashenko expected more from the relationship. Minsk and Brussels have found themselves at an impasse for five years, unable to agree on the simplified visa regime, which is already in force for Russians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, not to mention Ukrainians who can travel to the EU visa-free. The EU is refusing to start talks with Belarus about the so-called base agreement which it has concluded with all the other post-Soviet countries.

Furthermore, Minsk doesn't see what exactly it can gain from conceding to Brussels.

One obstacle is the human rights situation, as it has deteriorated over the past two years has in Belarus. The authorities are once again imprisoning activists for days on end, media laws have become stricter, journalists are threatened with court cases and administrative hurdles, and a huge fee for holding officially approved protests has been introduced. As far as the death penalty and electoral reform are concerned, there's no hint of progress. Belarus and the EU have been unable to agree on the most standard framework document, 'Priorities of the Partnership', for a year and a half now. Lithuania, which is opposed to Belarussian nuclear power plants, is refusing to budge.

In spite of all the dialogue, increasing the volume of trade is also proving impossible. The basis of Belarussian exports to the EU remains petroleum products, which means that, as soon as the pipes get obstructed or Russia makes new tax manoeuvres, thetrade with the EU suffers. And it's simply not possible for many other Belarussian goods or foodstuffs to break into the heavily protected European market. Both sides immediately run into a whole host of difficulties.

Hitting the wall

For starters, the EU lacks major resources and the political will to actively engage with Belarus. Much more attention is paid to internal problems such as Brexit or other eastern partners such as Ukraine and Georgia, who already know what they want from the EU. When there's no political will, nobody even attempts to speed up bureaucratic processes or

persuade Lithuania not to meddle in talks, for example.

But Minsk isn't doing anything to encourage the EU to take an active interest either. Of course, there are objective limitations on its negotiating powers, notably Belarus' non-membership of the EU. But the Belarussian authorities are unwilling to pass reforms that would improve relations, such as a symbolic moratorium on the death penalty. First of all, it's frightening to loosen the reins. In Belarus, 'democracy' is virtually a swear word.

Furthermore, Minsk doesn't see what exactly it can gain from conceding to Brussels. It's a vicious circle, with the absence of distinct interests and willingness to effect change on both sides only serving to reinforce mutual passivity. If Belarus and the EU have not yet hit the wall when it comes to their rapprochement, then they have come very close.

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