

Minsk comes to an agreement with Brussels

BELARUS AFTER THE FIFTH EASTERN PARTNERSHIP SUMMIT OF THE EU

The rapprochement process between Belarus and the European Union, which started in 2015, gains new momentum thanks to the Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2017. Further tangible progress now to expected – if Belarus remains active going forward.

Before the Eastern Partnership Summit on November 24, 2017 there was a major debate in Brussels whether the participation of the President Alexander Lukashenko is to be expected after he had received an invitation from Brussels. This event was a political issue insofar as this could have been the first official Lukashenko's visit after the sanctions were lifted by the European Union. Although, basically, the participation of Lukashenko was not clearly ruled out by the Belarusian party, his participation was not greenlighted after a lengthy assessment. Officially, President Alexander Lukashenko cited conflicting deadlines and decisions, which had been made long before, as a reason.¹ However, more probably, it was rather general foreign policy conditions, which led to the fact that in the end it was the foreign minister Vladimir Makei who took part in the Summit.

View from Belarus

From the government's point of view, an obstacle to this prominent step forward, which would have been Lukashenko's participation, was comparatively low progress in the cooperation between the EU and Belarus under the Eastern Partnership umbrella. Specifically – in the field of simplification of visa requirements, which has been long awaited by Minsk and has not been

achieved yet. Although in 2017 Belarus for its part introduced a limited visa-free period for, among others, EU citizens, thus making a political trade-off, currently it seems that all unaddressed administrative and financial issues remain an obstacle for visa facilitation. Besides, as far as relations with the EU are concerned, the government in Minsk critically noted that the sought-after negotiations concerning the framework agreement between the EU and Belarus still had not commenced. For the government it was after all a quite clear political decision, whereby specific progress, which was expected after the Summit in Brussels, did not have any relation to the prominence of Lukashenko's participation.

Headroom with respect to Moscow

There is no validation of the speculations concerning the fact that Moscow has put pressure on Minsk to not be represented at the highest level. On the other hand, Belarus was basically clearly given the green light by Moscow to get more actively involved in the Eastern Partnership.² Thanks to skilful tactics during the past few months Minsk had the headroom to manoeuvre, in contrast to Moscow, to take the position where it can develop its relations with the EU without thereby damaging the existing close ties with Moscow. Without any doubt, the cases of Armenia and Kazakhstan were a helpful reference for developing this new positioning by Minsk. Although these countries, just as Belarus, are integrated in the Eurasian Economic Union, in the recent years they have successfully set up special relations with the European Union. In the light of the above, the fact that Alexander

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Lukashenko did not take part in this Summit should neither be regarded as a political signal, nor overestimated in general. Minsk seems to be interested in the further strengthening its relations with the European Union regardless of the present-day political imagery. And, not in the least, one thing became obvious after the Summit in a media interview with the foreign minister Makei: in a rare case of unambiguous statement he explained that geographically and politically Belarus belongs to Europe.³

Results for Belarus and Brussels

Still, the results of the fifth Eastern Partnership Summit for Belarus are acknowledged and viewed positively in Minsk. One of the important outcomes, which especially counts, is the agreement concerning the roadmaps for the expansion of the core network of the Trans-European transport network⁴ – it enables financing of major infrastructure projects, which Minsk hopes to implement at the crossroads between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union.⁵ As a result of the Summit, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appeared to be not only confident that the agreement related to the partnership priorities for 2018-2020 can be signed in the first half of 2018⁶, but also that the commencement of negotiations concerning the desired framework agreement between the EU and Belarus⁷, as well as progress in the visa facilitation, are now to be expected shortly. Also Belarus welcomed the impression it got, that the Eastern Partnership will approach the participating countries in a more tailored manner in future and it could take greater account of their individual interests and capacities. Immediately following the Summit, the EU-Belarus Coordination Group met again in Brussels on December 18-20 for further negotiations. Among the issues discussed were, *inter alia*, the bilateral trade relations, sectoral cooperation, technical assistance and mobility of citizens.

Regarding the fifth Summit it is also notable that the foreign minister Makei co-signed the Summit Declaration, which addresses, among other issues, the remaining violations of the international law in the area

surrounding the EU.⁸ Although not mentioned specifically, it was still clear that this essentially concerns the actions of Russia in the Ukraine. The fact that Minsk joined this declaration is quite exceptional, first of all against the backdrop of the Union State that Belarus forms with Russia. Belarus also backed the goals of the Summit Declaration, which reinforce the resilience of the participating states.⁹ This must be also recognized within the framework of challenges, which many European countries currently see in relation to Russia. Moreover, it can be put to Brussels' credit that by signing the Summit document Belarus has again committed itself to democratic values.¹⁰ This and other recent clear pro-European stances of Minsk may give cause for the European Union to hope that this neighbouring state will further participate in the Eastern Partnership in a more active and constructive manner. This is also positive news of the Summit for the EU: Belarus seems to develop serious interest in a more active part in the Eastern Partnership. Up to now it was a participating state with an inferior degree of activity.

Trust and capacities

This expected development in relations is still encumbered with a number of fundamental issues between Brussels and the Republic of Belarus. First, as a result of many years of lowest-level contacts, there are still only very small channels for communication and cooperation despite the existing EU-Belarus Coordination Group.¹¹ After twenty years of difficult relations the question of trust, which is now in its building state, also becomes quite prominent. For Brussels it is measured by the key issue of whether Minsk also makes actual progress with regard to political freedoms and civil rights.

Furthermore, the capacities of the government in Minsk are extremely limited in terms of development of relations with the European Union. Many western observers often treat this argument as merely speculative. On the one hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of the process and the rest of the government are currently facing layoffs. On the other hand, Minsk is involved in a quite active integration process

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with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In the beginning of 2018 a uniform Customs Code enters into force, which can have a definitely more powerful and immediate effect on the foreign and economic relations of Belarus, than cooperation projects with the European Union. The new common Customs Law of the EEU is to replace the Customs Code of the Customs Union, which has been in place since 2010, and facilitate and advance the economic relations for the enterprises within the EEU through a number of novelties, *inter alia*, through the digitalization of customs procedures. The matter is urgent and slow at the same time, as evidenced by the fact that although the Customs Code must come into effect on January 1, 2018, as of mid-December 2017 it has not even been ratified by all the participating states, not to mention that national legislation had to be adapted everywhere.¹² These new priorities, capacity bottlenecks, and obviously only limited will to boost cooperation with the West are currently the crucial inhibitors for Belarus' cooperation with the European Union.

Civil society

As far as the internal affairs of Belarus are concerned, the government must further consider private and state's economic interests, which it does not always want or can utilize for the improvement of relations with the European Union. Unlike in Ukraine or in Georgia, Belarus in recent years saw no development of pro-Western young generation, there is one which could only be comparable with regard to their attitudes, and which at least possesses corresponding language skills, basic information about the West and also the motivation for greater social convergence. Also there is a plain lack of quantitatively and qualitatively substantial civil society organizations with closer contacts with broader local population.

Occasionally, the political opposition in Belarus is also critical of the rapprochement between Brussels and Minsk. The attitude of the opposition forces towards the EU and with regard to the EU initiatives, such as Eastern Partnership, is articulated most clearly and almost solely by the centre-right

coalition composed of partner parties of the European People's Party. Thus, through its candidates during the parliamentary elections of 2016 in the coalition used a common coordinated message to emphasize the importance of convergence of the country with the EU. From the point of view of some representatives from the political opposition and civil society, current rapprochement, however, runs the risk of strengthening the existing political system. According to the viewpoint expressed in this regard, the existing political system and the government part are still not ready to introduce substantial changes in political freedoms and civil rights. Therefore civil society and opposition must be given the opportunity to provide consultations related to projects between Belarus and the EU. Partly it has been already achieved through the involvement of social forces in the EU-Belarus Coordination Group, but the opposition still requires direct participation in negotiations concerning cooperation.

Visibility of the EU

One of the key issues in current approach of the EU to Belarus is its remaining low social visibility in the country. On the one hand, it is a result of basically no references made by political actors in Belarus to the EU, as well as rather rare visits and events with clear connection with the EU. Indeed, the state media provide extensive reports about contacts and developments in relations with the European Union; however, the general public is not covered by this information. The Russian outlets, which are often the predominant media in the country, general lack of interest in political developments, and also political distancing from the European Union, which lasted for more than two decades, all lead to the fact that the existing possibilities for political development are often deemed by the population and subordinate decision-makers to be not real and not feasible.

On the other hand, the current measures and available funding by the EU must be more intensively communicated throughout the country. Even members of the Parliament and experts, not to mention broad

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population, are badly informed about which projects are currently funded by the EU in Belarus and which core values underpin their implementation. A yearly survey supported by the EU within the framework of the *EU Neighbours East Projects* revealed that currently only 39 percent of Belarusian people are aware of the financial assistance provided by the EU for Belarus. This is the second-lowest result in the countries of the Eastern Partnership after Azerbaijan (33 percent).¹³ Of these 39 percent only every third knows about the specific programs of the EU.¹⁴ In this regard a strongly recommended approach for the short- and medium-term engagement of the European Union is obvious: It must inform, communicate and convince more intensively about all the major political initiatives in the country. Here commentaries of western observers and political representatives related to current debates can clearly make a difference. In view of improved conditions for the work of independent media, according to the findings of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the country, and with a view to provide greater openness also of state media, it is thereby also recommended to utilize, more active than before, the existing information channels in Belarus.

Positive results

For the period from 2017 to 2020 the bilateral cooperation between the European Union and Belarus shall be implemented through the *Single Support Framework*. It combines such issues, as economic development and market opportunities, strengthening of institutions and good governance, connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate protection, mobility and human contacts. This tool of the Eastern Partnership supported by the results of the fifth Summit thereby seems to be a suitable framework for action. Basically it offers all the instruments, which can be meaningfully utilized. An example of successful cooperation between the EU and Belarus could be found specifically in the field of environmental protection. A comprehensive EU project "Transition to *Green Economy*" is currently in its final stage in Belarus. It is financed by the EU and implemented by the UNDP in

cooperation with the Ministry for Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the country. The EU labelled the project as successful and praised the efforts of the ministries to launch innovative development projects in the field of economy and ecology. The EU provided twelve million Euros during the last two years solely for the shift in the Republic of Belarus towards renewable energies.¹⁵ Furthermore, Belarus is one of the most active countries in the Eastern Partnership in the field of the EU's *Horizon2020* research programme.¹⁶ Even in the field of education, science and research there are still many opportunities for action which have not been used – an avenue specifically highlighted by the European Parliament in its latest resolution related to Belarus.¹⁷

Outlook

Whether this approach can be qualitatively and quantitatively translated into the above mentioned policy fields areas, is conditional, first of all, on further development of broader political relations between Minsk and Brussels. For the past several months the European Union showed greater interest, if not even more favourable attitude to the official Belarus. However a smaller camp of the EU Member States are sceptical regarding the rapprochement and they expect evidence of tangible political developments in the country before making further steps. Influential major groups of EU Member States, however, speak out in favour of continuation and, if applicable, intensification of the current dialogue with Minsk in order to support these awaited improvements with incentives. Also for the German Bundestag such a perspective of development of relations, according to the decision from the previous legislative period in June 2017 concerning Eastern Partnership, is possible only if the situation related to the freedom of opinion and assembly in Belarus improves. The Council also leans in the same direction.¹⁸

Thereby, visits by high-ranking politicians from the EU to Belarus remain an meaningful measures for the objective assessment of developments in Belarus and also for re-

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peatedly and appropriately reminding the partners in Minsk of preconditions for cooperation with the European Union. Without a doubt, such milestone was the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel to the Minsk Forum XV in November 2017, which was also supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Last time the country was visited in 2010 by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs Guido Westerwelle. During his visit Gabriel advocated not only for further convergence of Belarus and the EU, but also for steps, which can lead to the accession of the Republic of Belarus to the Council of Europe.¹⁹ An intensified discussion about the prospects for the accession of Belarus to the Council of Europe, including the debate on the moratorium or abolition of the death penalty in Belarus, which is required for this purpose, is also supported by the representatives of the CDU-CSU group in the German Bundestag. Steps in this direction would, without any doubt, also represent important milestones for the improvement of relations with the European Union.

¹ BELTA. Лукашенко: решение направить главу МИД в Брюссель было принято задолго до саммита. 24.11.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/Xckv6b>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

² BELTA. Россия понимает интерес Беларуси в "Восточном партнерстве" - Лавров. 02.12.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/RJpgUr>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

³ Svaboda.org. Макей: Неўзабаве ўдзел прэзыдэнта ў мерапрыемствах па лініі Эўразьвязу будзе звычайнай справай. 08.12.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/YuG5V6>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

⁴ Europäische Kommission - Pressemitteilung. Gipfeltreffen der Östlichen Partnerschaft 2017: Stärker zusammen. 24.11.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/6dKR25>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

⁵ Eastern Partnerships Indicative TEN-T maps, Online available at: <https://goo.gl/WiqHWK>. See also: <http://ec.europa.eu/transport/infrastructure/tentec/tentec-portal/site/en/maps.html>. (retrieval date:18.12.2018). Die ÖP-Länder unterschrieben die "High Level Understandings between the EU and partner countries defining the indicative maps on the core networks".

⁶ BELTA. Belarus-EU partnership priorities almost coordinated.11.12.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/vAjVfb>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

⁷ Веларан. Замглавы МИД Кравченко: Беларусь готова начать переговоры с ЕС о заключении соглашения о партнерстве и сотрудничестве. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/RM1HCw>, retrieval date:18.12.2018.

⁸ Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Brussels, 24 November 2017, S. 3. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/aJPxeC>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

⁹ Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Brussels, 24 November 2017, S. 2, 7. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/aJPxeC>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁰ Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Brussels, 24 November 2017, S. 1. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/aJPxeC>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹¹ Delegation of the European Union to Belarus. EU-Belarus relations. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/MtzbZD>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹² Pravo.by. Новый Таможенный кодекс Евразийского экономического союза вступит в силу с 1 января 2018 года. 14.11.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/jiUg8U>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

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¹³ EU neighbours East. ANNUAL SURVEY REPORT: REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2017. S.

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<https://goo.gl/xbP7tx>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁴ EU neighbours East. Awareness and Effectiveness of EU Support 2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/GeJ9Js>, siehe auch: <https://goo.gl/kknkYv>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁵ Ostexperte.de. *Analyse zur Außen- und Europapolitik von Belarus*. Author: Matthias Dornfeldt. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/s7UsF9>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁶ EU Neighbours. Facts and Figures about EU-Belarus Relations. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/7ndU3F>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁷ European Parliament resolution on the situation in Belarus (2017/2647(RSP), 5.4.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/UZASx3>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁸ BELTA. *Лукашенко: решение направить главу МИД в Брюссель было принято задолго до саммита*. 24.11.2017. Online available at: <https://goo.gl/XcKv6b>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.

¹⁹ Speech by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at the Minsk Forum XV, Online available at: <https://goo.gl/mtnBJw>, retrieval date: 18.12.2018.