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Belarus-West Relations: The New Normal

Dzianis Melyantsou¹

The new geopolitical environment formed after the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, together with emerging threats and challenges, are pressing both Belarus and the West to revise their policies in the region as well as their relations with each other. In this new context, Belarus is seeking a more balanced foreign policy and, at least towards the Ukrainian crisis, a more neutral stance.

Compared to the less-than-successful Belarus-Western efforts at a new normalization between 2008 and 2010, this new effort promises to be more sustainable, for a number of reasons. Minsk is more motivated to achieve greater independence from Russia and to advance a new pragmatic bilateral agenda with the European Union, and in Western capitals there has been a shift in perception regarding threats and challenges that has brought new life to geopolitical considerations.

This new “normalization,” however, is also likely to face significant limits. Abroad, Minsk will have to fulfill its obligations as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At home, it can only allow modest domestic political liberalization, since the government still prioritizes political stability over closer ties with the West.

The History of Belarus-Western Relations

¹ Dzianis Melyantsou is a Senior Analyst with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS).

Relations between independent Belarus and the West have been difficult. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the newly proclaimed Republic of Belarus started to build democracy and established diplomatic relations with Western countries. It signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the European Union and welcomed U.S. President Bill Clinton to Minsk in 1994. But after Alexander Lukashenko started to consolidate his authoritarian rule and returned to the idea of integration with Russia, relations with the Western democracies deteriorated dramatically. In the response to an unconstitutional referendum in 1996, repressions against political opposition, and manipulated elections in 2001 and 2004 the EU and the United States imposed personal sanctions against a number of Belarusian officials, including President Lukashenko, and restricted political and economic cooperation with Belarus. EU member states declined to ratify the PCA, and Belarus was labeled in the West as "the last dictatorship in Europe."

Despite deterioration of the relations with the West and the sanctions, Belarus felt confident because it enjoyed economic and political support from Russia, with which Minsk developed relatively deep integration. Loans as well as oil and gas subsidies from Russia formed a base for the Belarusian economic model, allowing Minsk to sustain quite high living standards for citizens and thus to ensure the political loyalty of the population to the incumbent authorities.

The situation started to change in the mid-2000s, when Putin's Russia tried to revise its relations with its closest allies and made several attempts to reduce the level of economic support for Belarus, which led to a number of conflict situations and trade wars. Close relations with Russia were preserved, as Russia remained the only supplier of energy resources and was a major market for Belarusian heavy and outdated industry. But since that time official Minsk began to think about a more diversified trade and foreign policy, and improving its relations with the West.

Another important motivation was economic: after the Big Bang enlargement in 2004 the European Union became the second trade partner for Belarus after Russia, and it was critically important to ensure good and stable political relations with the EU in order to sustain economic stability and create a balance to the Russian vector of Belarus's foreign policy.

The first serious attempt to normalize relations between Belarus and the European Union took place in 2008-2010, when after the Russian-Georgian war Minsk did not recognize as independent the separatist Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; released all political prisoners; decreased the level of repression against domestic opposition forces; and softened its rhetoric towards the West.

Belarusian authorities also made some small steps to organize more opens and competitive campaigns during parliamentary (2008) and presidential (2010) elections. In response, the

European Union suspended personal sanctions against almost all Belarusian officials. That paved the way for visits by Lukashenko to Lithuania and Italy after years of isolation. Relations with Washington remained at a very low level throughout this period, however, especially after the diplomatic crisis in 2008, which led to a decrease of diplomatic staff and withdrawal of ambassadors.

This wave of normalization ended with the crackdown on the opposition demonstration on the day of presidential elections (December 19, 2010). The EU reintroduced sanctions and stopped contacts with Belarusian top officials. Nevertheless, Belarus retained its membership in the Eastern Partnership, which became almost the only platform for intergovernmental communication between Minsk and Brussels.

In 2012-2013 Minsk again took steps to normalize relations with the West. This process has been going slowly and has been painful, given the huge distrust that had accumulated following the first unsuccessful normalization attempt. The crisis in Ukraine and Minsk's neutral position towards Kyiv gave a significant impetus to the process. Today we can say that the relations between Belarus and the West have entered a new phase of sustainable normalization that is gaining momentum.

What Does Belarus Want from the West?

Belarusian authorities, Belarusian society, and the Belarusian opposition all have different interests when it comes to relations with the West. The Belarusian government is primarily interested in more financial and technical aid, loans, investments, and transfer of technologies. It is also very much interested in access of Belarusian goods to the European and American markets. Besides this, Minsk is seeking geopolitical balance between an increasingly aggressive Russia and the West to ensure its own security and stability as a "situationally neutral" country. To this end, official Minsk is prepared to make some concessions towards the West (e.g. less repression against political opponents and human rights dialogues with the United States and the EU), but only to the extent that they do not undermine the established political system.

According to a recent research conducted by the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarusian society is primarily interested in the EU first as a partner to help with economic reforms and development (32.6 percent of respondents) and as a trade partner (23.1 percent of respondents). Only 8.9% of Belarusians think that Belarus could benefit from cooperation with the EU in the sphere of democracy and good governance.² The EU is also an attractive destination for

² "Belarus between the European union and the Eurasian Economic Union", ODB-Brussels (April 6, 2016), http://by.oddb-office.eu/ekspertyza/_dasledavanni/belarus-mezhdu-evropeyskim-soyuzom-i-evraziyskim-ekonomicheskim-soyuzom-issledovanie-vospriyatiya (accessed November 28, 2016).

shopping and tourism for ordinary Belarusians. Per capita, Belarus is the leading country in the world when it comes to Schengen visas.

The United States is less interesting and important than the EU for ordinary Belarusians. Moreover, 52.4 percent of the population consider the United States to be as a hostile country. Nonetheless, Belarusians express positive attitudes towards the United States (55.7 percent) and Americans (60.6 percent). One third of respondents say that Belarus should restore good relations with Washington.³

Belarusian opposition and civil society organizations (including human rights groups) *en mass* consider the EU and the United States as democracy promoters and donors of financial support for pro-democratic organizations in Belarus. Therefore the ideal scenario for the opposition would be increasing pressure of the West upon the Belarusian government to democratize and to include the opposition in the decision-making process (as a variant – Polish-style round table with the mediation of the West). Yet the Belarusian opposition is almost completely financed by Western sources and enjoys weak support from Belarusian society. According to public opinion polls, the overall rating of the political opposition rarely exceeds 20 percent⁴ while the level of distrust reaches more than 60 percent.⁵

The New Normalization

In some ways, today's normalization resembles the 2008-2010 initiative to improve relations with the West. Belarus has approached each effort with two major goals: first, to counterbalance Russia's political influence; and second, to secure Western investments and loans. To these ends, official Minsk liberalized the political climate inside the country, pursued greater independence from Moscow in foreign policy, and significantly softened its rhetoric towards the West. Each time the powerful triggers of détente were conflicts in the post-Soviet space inspired by Russia and the West's negative reaction to Russia's activities. And each time Minsk sought to use these crises to enhance its independence and its role in the region.

Despite these similarities, the new normalization is characterized by significant differences that render it more promising, and ultimately more sustainable. First, the war in Ukraine influenced the security environment in the region more seriously than the Russia-Georgia war, and

³ Results of the national poll, IISEPS (June 2-12, 2016), <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4733> (accessed November 29, 2016).

⁴ Main results of the national poll conducted in March 2016, IISEPS (March 29, 2016), <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3960> (accessed November 29, 2016).

⁵ Main results of the national poll conducted in December 2013, IISEPS (March 29, 2016), <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=2685> (accessed November 29, 2016).

demanded a clearer position from Belarus. Belarusian authorities were seriously frightened, and moved to strengthen their defense capacities and to stake out more independent positions from Russia in all spheres. Since 2014 Belarus conducts military exercises and trainings of the Border Guards and territorial defense troops (National Guard) almost every month. President Lukashenka ordered to start Belarus's own missile program to achieve more independence from Russian armament. Belarus also has adapted its Military Doctrine to the new security environment.

Second, both Minsk and Western capitals have learned the lessons of the previous round of normalization and thus lowered the bar with regard to their expectations. Today the parties prefer slow but sure steps towards each other. They are focused on confidence building measures and on concrete questions of constructive cooperation, temporarily taking sensitive political issues out of agenda.

Third, since 2013 the EU and Belarus have been advancing a more comprehensive agenda for their relations. Minsk and Brussels have started sectorial dialogues on topics ranging from border security to environment and food safety. They are continuing negotiations on visa facilitation as well as on readmission agreements to manage the return of irregular migrants. In addition to the Eastern Partnership, a Belarus-EU coordination group was established as a new platform for communication following their earlier Dialogue on modernization. In 2015 the EU also defined a list of possible measures (essentially the normalization road map) that Brussels could implement to deepen its relations with Belarus should there be continuous positive dynamics inside the country. Taken together, these initiatives affirm the serious interest of both parties in deepening their dialogue.

Fourth, to make the process of normalization with the West more effective, this time Minsk has decided to make a special effort to improve its relations with the United States, as a way to make the process more sustainable, given U.S. weight in international politics.

Fifth, Western countries have also changed their attitude towards Belarus and its leader, against the backdrop of Russia's aggressive actions as well as instability inside Ukraine and other regions bordering the EU. For the West today, Belarusian stability, controllability as well as the position towards the conflict in Ukraine have become more important than democracy promotion.

The Ukrainian Factor

Whereas the conflict in Georgia influenced Belarus's security only indirectly, the Ukrainian conflict has given Belarus an unmarked border of more than 1000 km with a belligerent country. Before 2014 trade turnover with Ukraine reached more than \$6 billion, making Kyiv a

very important trade partner for Minsk. Russia's annexation of Crimea and hostilities in the Donbas caused a twofold reaction from official Minsk. First Minsk authorities were irritated because their closest military ally did not inform them about a military operation in an important neighboring country. This irritation translated into harsh public criticism by Lukashenko of the Kremlin's behavior, as well as a scramble to stay clear of the conflict. Second, Belarusian authorities were genuinely frightened by the Russian actions. This fear prompted efforts to strengthen their defense capabilities and to tout Belarusian national identity.

Before the Ukrainian crisis, no one in Belarus really believed that Russians could wage war against Ukrainians, given that they are ethnically, culturally and historically close nations. The war in Donbas raised concerns for Lukashenko and his team that the Kremlin might do the same to them.

Belarus is the only country within the Eastern Partnership that fully controls its territory and has no territorial claims⁶ and conflicts with its neighbors. Nevertheless, after the Ukrainian crisis Belarusian authorities have made efforts to improve the readiness of their military forces and to enhance their military independence to adapt to the new security environment. To this end Belarus's military doctrine was updated, a new martial law was passed in 2014-2015, and an updated defense plan was signed by the President. According to defense minister Andrej Raikou, the new military doctrine is focused on "tendencies connected with planning of colored revolutions and mechanisms to change constitutional order, undermining of territorial integrity of a state by inspiration of internal armed conflicts."⁷ The document also includes a wider list of internal and external threats, and for the first time states the need for an "active position of the state in prevention of a military conflict by taking preemptive measures of strategic containment."⁸ Obviously, these changes were inspired by the conflict in Ukraine.

To prevent the possible infiltration of militants and trafficking in weapons from the territory of Ukraine, Belarusian authorities have started taking measures to enhance the security of the Belarus-Ukraine border both in terms of infrastructure (demarcation of the border has been started) and in terms of countering possible attacks. In the course of 2014-2015 Belarus organized a number of exercises near the border with participation of the military forces, territorial troops and the border guard to test their ability to close and protect the border.

Throughout 2014-2015 Russia pressed Belarusian authorities to establish on Belarusian territory Russian airforce base, officially in order to reinforce the air defense system of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, but actually – to control Belarus and Ukraine. As of the present moment the

⁶ Belarus and Ukraine have finalized an agreement on their border and now the border is being demarcated.

⁷ "The new Military Doctrine was designed in response to the colored revolutions [in Russian]," TUT.by (April 4, 2016), <https://news.tut.by/society/491061.html> (accessed November 27, 2016).

⁸ The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus, http://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/doktrina/ (accessed November 27, 2016).

topic of the Russian airforce base on the Belarusian territory seems to be not an issue any longer as Belarusian leadership strongly opposed this idea. Objectively, there is no military need for Moscow to have such base. But from the Kremlin's perspective the base could serve multiple political purposes: demonstrating to Kyiv its vulnerability; presenting Belarus as a loyal Russian ally; and offering a response to NATO's buildup in the Baltics and in Poland.

Belarusian authorities have also taken a number of steps to strengthen Belarusian national identity and expanding the use of the Belarusian language. Lukashenko has urged preparation of a new and more patriotic school textbook on the history of Belarus. Previously banned Belarusian-speaking music bands can now perform. A representative of the opposition Belarusian Language Society was allowed into the Parliament. Although this trend toward greater 'Belarusianization' was evident before Ukraine's second Maidan, the Ukrainian crisis has accelerated the process.

Sustainable Normalization

The experience of the previous normalization showed that the mutual expectations the West and official Minsk had of each other were too high. The West demanded democratization with the help of the Belarusian opposition, which was absolutely unacceptable to Lukashenko, who as an autocratic leader cannot implement democratic reforms without losing power. And Brussels and Washington were severely disappointed when security forces cracked down brutally on an opposition demonstration on election day, September 19, 2010, fearing that it could signify the beginning of a Belarusian version of Ukraine's "Orange Revolution."

Minsk also was unrealistic to expect that the West would be open to granting multi-billion loans and greater EU financial assistance in exchange for a release of political prisoners and non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such expectations were formed in part by European politicians themselves: during their visit to Minsk just before the 2010 presidential elections, the foreign ministers of Poland and Germany Radoslaw Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle, promised €3 billion for Belarus in case the elections would be more free and fair. While the election day crackdown ensured that no Western assistance would be forthcoming, until that point the Belarusian leadership did try to ensure a much freer campaign than in the previous elections in 2006.⁹ In the end, Lukashenko's need to maintain control outweighed his interest in Western assistance, and following the elections official Minsk reverted to the same repressive policies and anti-Western rhetoric.

These episodes have all added realism to Belarus-Western relations. Today the parties understand each other's motives and limitations much better, and are not setting impossible

⁹ Official Minsk differentiated the electoral campaign, which they believed to be more open, and the events of the electoral day's evening, which they believed to be a threat.

goals. Realizing that the Belarusian authoritarian regime is stable enough and does not intend to democratize in order to be closer to the EU, Brussels prefers to work in areas that do not cause rejection by Minsk and do not affect the fundamentals of the Belarusian political system. The EU now tends to promote liberalization in Belarus indirectly, for instance through humanitarian projects, tourism, and assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises. Today the main goal is not democratization but rather stability on its eastern borders. Rapprochement should be reached by simplifying Schengen visa procedures, securing a Mobility partnership and reaching a level of trust conducive to starting negotiations on a new agreement establishing contractual relations.

For their part, Belarusian authorities understand the EU's limitations and do not expect quick progress or large financial benefits from normalization. According to Belarus foreign minister Uladzimir Makiej, Belarus and the European Union have agreed to address only solvable problems and to bring sensitive issues out of agenda. The past three years have shown that this approach has been more successful, and enabled the parties to move further in the process of normalization, than between 2008 and 2010.

The New Agenda

Relative sustainability of the process of normalization has been achieved inter alia due to formulating a comprehensive agenda of both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Over the past two years, relations with the European Union have been developing mainly within the framework of the Eastern Partnership initiative (ministerial formal and informal meetings, expert roundtables) and the Dialogues on modernization and their subsequent format, the Belarus-EU Coordination Group, which held its first meeting in April 2016. Belarus and the EU have also reopened the Human Rights Dialogue.¹⁰ Minsk and Brussels have also continued negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements (the process is at the final stage) and on a Mobility Partnership, and have signed a Cooperation Arrangement on an Early Warning Mechanism in the energy sector.

In January 2015 the EU elaborated an internal document entitled “The List of possible additional concrete measures to deepen the EU's policy of critical engagement with Belarus” (or informally the “29 measures”), which, as mentioned earlier, could be considered as a normalization roadmap. Belarusian authorities have made a number of steps in liberalizing the domestic political environment (e.g. they have freed political prisoners) and took a neutral position towards the crisis over Ukraine. In return the EU has implemented a number of measures from the list, including lifting sanctions, resuming contacts at a high political level, and increasing financial assistance. In fact, as of this writing 12 of the 29 measures have been implemented by

¹⁰ EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, EEAS (June 9, 2016), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5040/eu-belarus-human-rights-dialogue_en (accessed November 30, 2016).

the European Union. Minsk has also stated that it was ready to start negotiations on a new agreement on partnership and cooperation with the EU.

In the framework of the Belarus-EU Coordination Group, eleven priorities were elaborated in which the EU could assist Belarus in its modernization process:

1. Support the development of enterprises, creation of a specialized agency.
2. SME internationalization (development of an SME strategy, access to finances for exports, availability of advisory services for export).
3. International and EU standards, rules of origin, and technical regulations.
4. Investments and business climate (increasing awareness in Belarus about EU/international standards, developing harmonization and compatibility of Eurasian Economic Union and EU standards, addressing problems and hidden barriers in attracting foreign investments, development of e-government).
5. Optimization of the radiation control network and modernization of automated system of radiation control in Belarus.
6. Development of green economy.
7. Provision of public access to environmental information.
8. Connecting Belarus' electricity system with neighboring countries.
9. Modernization of transport infrastructure in Belarus and at Belarus-EU border crossing points.
10. Provision of social services at permanent establishments for social treatment.
11. Establishment of a National Human Rights Institution in Belarus.¹¹

Thus, today official Minsk is involved in an intensified dialogue with Brussels in a number of spheres, including political, economic and security issues, with participation of many governmental officials as well as experts and diplomats. In the framework of this interaction, mutual benefits are being achieved and mutual trust are being built. This type of trust- and confidence-building process could help to avoid misunderstandings and crises in future.

Washington's Importance

Belarus's interest in improving its relationship with the United States is quite obvious — the country wishes to ensure its security. The United States is regarded by the Belarusian

¹¹ “Eleven priorities of the dialogue. What Minsk and Brussels discussed during the first meeting of the Coordination group” [in Russian], TUT.by (April 8, 2016), <https://news.tut.by/politics/491767.html> (accessed November 29, 2016).

administration as a superpower capable of and ready for tough actions in its foreign policy. Stronger relations with the United States offer hope that Washington will not seek destabilization in Belarus by financing the opposition and supporting revolutionary scenarios. U.S. support would also be important to Belarus's efforts to accede to the World Trade Organization, and it would prove useful to Minsk's campaign to expand its trade relations as well. Furthermore, because the Kremlin's foreign policy is becoming unpredictable, it is increasingly relevant for official Minsk to find a way to offset the pressure of Russia. Additional leverage in the form of cooperation with the United States may become a very valuable tool.

It should be noted that in this new foreign policy framework that has been shaped under the impact of the war in Ukraine, a reset of Belarus's relationship with the United States is even more important to Minsk than the normalization of its relations with the European Union, because the Belarusian authorities perceive the United States as a leading power — once it revises its approaches, the EU will eventually change its policies accordingly. Belarus's focus has been shifted towards the United States also because the Ukrainian crisis made it obvious to official Minsk that the European Union is incapable of providing real support in case of confrontation with Russia.

The interest of the United States in restoring its relationship with Belarus is less apparent. Before the Ukrainian developments, Belarus was of little significance to Washington and was only relevant in the context of logistical support for NATO troops in Afghanistan -- as one of many options. Therefore, the United States could afford a principled position in criticizing the Belarusian autocratic regime and imposing sanctions with little regard for the consequences.

However, as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), of which Belarus is part, became increasingly significant (mostly because Pakistan lost its relevance for transit and NATO started to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan), and in view of the dramatic changes in the geopolitical situation resulting from the war in Ukraine, the approach of the U.S. administration started changing. Belarus became more interesting for a number of reasons: a) as a safe transit area in Eastern Europe, b) because Minsk served as a negotiation platform for Normandy format, c) neutral Belarus is of critical importance for security of Ukraine's northern border.

In 2010 Belarus also became part of one of the NDN routes to transit non-lethal goods to Afghanistan within the framework of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation. In 2011, Belarusian rail lines carried 587 20-foot-long containers (TEU) and 789 40-foot-long containers (FEU) of NATO freight one-way toward Afghanistan. In 2012, the traffic on the Belarusian railway more than doubled to 1,630 TEU and 1,823 FEU. However, in the first half of 2013, the volume of transit dropped, and so did the volume of funds anticipated for 2014, because NATO's combat operations in Afghanistan had concluded, and troops needed to be withdrawn from the country.

In April 2013, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Belarus Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej approved an additional agreement to extend the terms of the original

agreements on the transit of NATO cargoes to and from Afghanistan. In addition to non-lethal cargoes, the new agreement allowed two-way (from the United States and western Europe to Afghanistan and back) transit of NATO's armored vehicles, without armament and ammunition, through the territory of Belarus.

Apparently, the intensification of the relationship between Belarus and the United States in 2014 was stimulated by official Minsk's skillful balancing maneuvers with regard to the Ukrainian crisis. President Lukashenko's support for the new Ukrainian authorities and condemnation of separatists were hailed in Washington. In September 2014, representatives of the US Agency for International Development, the State Department and the Ministry of Defense stated during a visit to Minsk that they were "pleased that the Belarusian authorities have not gone so far as to recognize the annexation of Crimea by Russia and that Minsk agreed to host a meeting to find ways to solve the Ukrainian conflict."¹²

Thus, Belarus's neutral position in the conflict and its peacemaking efforts have brought more U.S.'s attention to the country and made Washington explore possibilities for expanded cooperation, which resulted in a series of visits at quite a high level. For its part, official Minsk began capitalizing on its position on Ukraine, hoping to improve its relationships with the West. Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikovich made this clear as he spoke at the opening of the Belarusian-American Investment Forum in New York: "I sincerely believe that this forum and a series of other major political events initiated by Belarus, including the Ukraine peace process, will result in a serious reset of the relationship between Belarus and the United States."¹³

In September 2015 the first high level official visit took place when Patrick Kennedy, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Management, met with Lukashenko in Minsk. And in March 2016 President Lukashenko met with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter. During the meeting Lukashenko noted that it was impossible to stabilize the situation in Ukraine without the United States.

In addition, according to an investigation conducted by BuzzFeed News,¹⁴ Minsk played some role in U.S. strategy in Syria. In 2014 the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), through several intermediary companies, acquired 700 Russian-designed Konkurs missiles from Belarus. The State Department licensed this deal. This case, together with other recent developments, underscores that Minsk and Washington had achieved enough trust that further steps toward greater normalization could be expected.

¹² "US Delegation: no thaw in relations following visit to Minsk", Euroradio (September 11, 2014), <http://euroradio.fm/en/us-delegation-no-warming-relations-following-visit-minsk> (accessed February 1, 2017).

¹³ "Mikhail Myasnikovich wants restart of Belarus-U.S. relations," The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus (September 23, 2016), <http://www.government.by/en/content/5699> (accessed November 30, 2016).

¹⁴ Aram Roston, "Meet The Obscure Company Behind America's Syria Fiasco," *BuzzFeed News*, September 17, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/aramroston/the-secret-arms-deal-behind-americas-syria-fiasco?utm_term=.va799nDXM#.lsPWW1aV4 (accessed November 30, 2016).

Belarus and the United States also have increased their diplomatic representation: the number of American diplomats in Minsk grew from 5 to 9; in 2016 Minsk and Washington accredited military attaches and started discussions on military cooperation. In addition, the United States provided temporary Treasury Department sanctions relief on nine Belarusian entities in November 2015 in response to the August 2015 release of political prisoners by Belarusian authorities.

Thus, the combination of geopolitical conditions and growing mutual interest in the normalization of relations (trade, non-proliferation, etc.) paved the way for a gradual and quite tangible process of unfreezing the bilateral relationship. Nonetheless, there is still much to be done before the relationship could be considered "normal". For instance, the United States still maintains sanctions against sixteen Belarusian officials for violations of human rights, and the level of diplomatic representation remains low.

Not The “Last Dictatorship in Europe” Any More

The EU has also reconsidered its attitude towards Belarus and Belarusian authorities. First, developments in Ukraine have shown that forced European integration on geopolitically contested territories, together with support for anti-government protests, can lead to instability and war, and that perhaps a stable and rather soft (compared e.g. to Azerbaijan or Russia) Belarusian authoritarian regime is not an absolute evil. Moreover, in 2014-2016 Minsk made some steps in liberalizing domestic political climate: all political prisoners were freed, opposition was able to campaign openly during at least two electoral campaign and to organize demonstrations in the center of Minsk without any repressions; civil society activists and opposition leaders got more access to the state media without censorship.

Second, compared to Putin, Alexander Lukashenko is no longer perceived by the West as a “bloody dictator” who should be removed as soon as possible.

Third, the new image of Minsk as the “place of peace” (according to the Pope) is not compatible with demonization of Belarusian authorities and the demanding tone traditionally used by Western leaders.

Fourth, Brussels finally understood that since Minsk did not plan to integrate with the EU, the usual conditionality policy was not applicable to Belarus, and that the EU should offer something different to influence the country.

Fifth, the EU apparently became disillusioned with the Belarusian opposition as a strong and realistic alternative to the incumbent government. It now additionally engages with Belarusian

state institutions in spheres of mutual interest. And since the Belarusian authorities refrain from repression against their political opponents and demonstrate more openness during electoral campaigns, the degree of EU criticism has dropped, so this contributes to the continuation of the policy of gradual normalization.

Finally, the September 2016 parliamentary elections brought sensational results. For the first time in more than a decade, two opposition candidates became members of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament.¹⁵ And though the ODIHR election monitoring mission did not recognize the elections as completely compliant with OSCE standards, it noted good organization of elections, bigger number of registered candidates (including opposition) and more possibilities for candidates to campaign (e.g. debates on state television).¹⁶ This is likely to offer the European Union some reasons, following the example of 2008, to point to some progress in Belarusian domestic political life and pave the way for more intensive cooperation, at least in some areas.

What Next?

Both Minsk and the West have learned the lessons of the previous "normalization" and now are cautiously trying to build more stable and comprehensive relations on the basis of mutual interests. For now these mutual interests are common border control, combatting illegal trafficking, environment protection and food safety, transit infrastructure and security in the region. In these spheres Belarus could be a cooperative partner.

In short, a depoliticized dialogue and cooperation in numerous spheres could be an effective mechanism. Belarus now desperately needs financial resources to overcome its economic crisis. The West could use conditionality to help modernize the country and make it more stable and predictable, rather than to push exclusively a democratization agenda, which, most probably, would only provoke Minsk's irritation and resistance, as it has before.

Nevertheless, one should remember that there are clear red lines which Belarus cannot cross on its way to improving relations with the West and aligning with European standards. First, Belarus remains a close ally of Russia, is deeply dependent on energy subsidies from Moscow and is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. In this regard, the goal to establish a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with Belarus (as one of the stated goals of the Eastern Partnership) seems unrealistic. On the other hand, some trade agreements and a renewed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement are quite achievable, and also desired by Belarusian authorities. Second, being a consolidated authoritarian regime, Belarus definitely will not

¹⁵ Hanna Kanapatskaya of the United Civil Party and Alena Anisim of the Belarusian Language Society.

¹⁶ Artsiom Shraibman, "OSCE on the Results of the Elections: Belarusian Authorities Partly Fulfilled Their Promises," *TUT.by*, September 12, 2016, <https://news.tut.by/politics/511771.html> (accessed November 30, 2016).

consider genuine democratization as one of the possible concessions towards the West during the normalization process. Today (and in the foreseeable future as well) domestic political stability is of preeminent importance to Belarusian authorities. Alignment with the West is a secondary goal. Therefore, to achieve practical progress in the relationship it will be more useful and effective to focus on a non-political agenda of mutual interest, namely issues such as trade, environment, border security, energy, transport, and education.

If the normalization process continues without interference by external players (Russia) or disruption by domestic shocks, Belarus and the European Union could finalize the Visa facilitation and Readmission agreements in 2017 and start negotiating an updated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, as well as an interim trade agreement that could function until the PCA enters into force. This would lend new impetus to trade and create a basis for institutionalized cooperation on the political level. In domestic politics, official Minsk could introduce a moratorium on the death penalty and further reform the electoral system to encourage greater participation of political parties and revitalization of the Parliament. But it is unrealistic to expect that at this stage the Belarusian government will ensure truly democratic and fully transparent electoral processes and consider the opposition as a legitimate part of the political system and not just as clients of the West.

In relations with the United States, realistically achievable results over the next two years could include a return of ambassadors (after the diplomatic crisis of 2008) and lifting of all sanctions imposed on Belarusian officials and enterprises. Official Minsk would be also cooperative in the security and legal spheres, as well as a facilitator with regard to the Ukrainian crisis.