

WHAT EASTERN PARTNERSHIP SHOULD BRING TO BELARUS

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RESUME

Eastern Partnership initiative is an encouraging sign of the European Union's commitment to the long-term political future and economic development and modernisation of former Soviet states. However, without a clear European perspective being offered to partner states, Eastern Partnership is not a wonder maker. The Partnership may still be successful if it focuses on realistic goals and provides incentives for internal Europeanization of partner states through pursuing ambitious economic modernization projects and promoting open borders for human movement, trade, investment, personal contacts, education, etc. With regard to problem states like Belarus, the EaP should be regarded as an instrument of restructuring and mindset change, rather than a regime change. The EU should therefore avoid inept application of political conditionality and promote politicise and projects that ensure reforms, societal transformation, geopolitical and civilisational gravitation of Belarus to Europe. At the same time, EaP shall promote active participation of civil society at all stages and in all programmes.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP BELARUS DILEMMA

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative of the European Union, originally suggested by Poland and Sweden in 2008, has been recognised as the EU's primary instrument of extending its political and economic influence in the area of the former Soviet Union. A closer engagement offers opportunities to stabilise the region, extend the area of security and prosperity, and ensure economic and energy security of both the EU and its partners.

Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership is essential to the long-term economic and geostrategic goals of this initiative. However, inviting Belarus to join the programme posed a certain moral dilemma for the EU, as it meant that the latter was extending a partnership offer to the leader who not only has a proven track record of violations of human rights but also consistently and tenaciously ignored the offers of a dialogue. The Belarusian authorities expressed interest in participating in the EaP, considering this to be a sign of geopolitical loyalty to the EU for which, in return, they would expect the EU to abstain from its efforts to democratise the country.

If the EU decides to apply strong political conditionality, while offering little incentive to comply, the EU-Belarus partnership would never come to life. The ensuing isolation from Western influences will reduce the costs of maintaining the existing regime and strengthen political and military dependence of Belarus upon Russia. At the same time, the EU cannot

proceed in its engagement with Belarus posing no conditionality at all, for this would mean backtracking on the fundamental principles guiding its foreign policy and economic assistance abroad.

The European Partnership, as the European Neighbourhood Policy beforehand, offers no clear European perspective to the partner states. Without clear message on possible future membership in the EU, Brussels' goals of securing peace, stability, and prosperity in the region are hardly achievable. Accordingly, the given initiative has to focus on realistic objectives, such as economic liberalisation and modernisation, energy security, administrative reform, increasing freedom of movement of goods, people, information and capital over the EU's eastern borders. If these objectives are achieved, they would serve indirectly the goal of political liberalisation of troubled countries, like Belarus, in the long-run. **Hence, projects and cooperation in the framework of the EaP should not be derailed by the inept application of political conditionality.**

Today, the EU has to be ready to offer a sense of stakeholdership by pursuing and approving more ambitious economic modernisation and development initiatives than those currently debated. By making explicit commitments to open borders for human movement, trade, investment, personal contacts, education, the EaP initiative would have better chances for success. It is therefore important that all partner countries, including most problematic ones like Belarus, are engaged in the process to ensure their geopolitical gravitation to Europe and to raise their stakes of exiting the partnership, once the EU conditionality for further engagement is upgraded.

The development of breakthrough projects and appropriate application of conditionality in pursuing the EaP goals would reflect one of the programme's strongest points – its flexibility vis-à-vis individual participants. At the same time, bilateral relations have to be complemented by a stronger multilateral track, where many of the region-wide programs will be concentrated. Ensuring a true spirit of partnership, cooperation, and openness of all EaP participants to each other would therefore be instrumental in promoting a greater openness and reform in all partner countries and, first of all, in Belarus.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND BELARUS: The Way Forward

Within the given context, the goal of EaP with regard to Belarus should be specified as promoting the reform, the mindset change in the society, and absorbing Belarus into the European orbit. Policies regarding Belarus' participation in the programme have to pursue the following goals:

- Adaptation of EU norms in the Belarusian legislation;
- Closer integration of Belarus' into the European economy;
- Elimination of barriers for people-to-people contacts and facilitating the spreading of European practices and values by gradually moving towards a visa-free travel regime;
- Establishing a permanent platform for a dialogue between pragmatic and reform-oriented segments in state institutions and civil society.

Removing restrictions on the free movement of people is of particular importance. In this context, **making visa facilitation** agreement a technical, not a political issue, and recording progress towards a visa-free regime should be one of the main priorities of the EaP, for facilitating cross-border movement is an instrument of ensuring positive changes in the country and the mindset of its people rather than as a reward for these changes.

These goals can be reached through realisation of the following steps:

1. Taking the Belarusian authorities at face value

During initial discussions on the configuration of EaP, many raised the question whether Belarus could grow into a full-fledged participant of the programme. There were opinions that Belarus may only participate partially, with full benefits contingent upon political

progress. However, the Belarusian authorities declared that they would accept full partnership – or none at all. The EU should take Minsk’s declarations at face value and insist that Belarus has to be prepared to commit itself to the code of good behaviour vis-à-vis **the community of European partners**.

It is worth considering institutionalising such code of good behaviour at the multilateral level and to oblige partners from both sides to respect a set of common rules that would make the entire partnership configuration truly operational. These rules could, for example, include:

- Respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all partner countries;
- Respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, including abolition of death penalty;
- Respect for free and uninhibited flow of information across the partner states;
- Respect for free movement of people;
- Respect for civil society’s activities, including elimination of artificial barriers for civil society cooperation, humanitarian aid, educational exchanges, etc.

The Belarusian authorities should also have a clear perception of the advantages of establishing a close partnership with the EU. Among other advantages, this concerns the economic benefits associated with Investment Facility provided for by the ENP.

2. Promoting breakthrough projects on bilateral level

On a bilateral level, promotion of ‘breakthrough’ projects aimed at the economic liberalisation and the market reform as pre-requisite for their implementation should be one of the key steps. One needs to propose and develop projects in areas where alternative economic and geopolitical sponsors may pose long-term threats to the interests of Belarusian elites and viability of the country’s economy and independence, or where their capability to assist Belarus’ development is rather limited. “Grand projects may thus be developed in the following areas

- Restructuring of the country’s power generation sector with the goal of increasing efficiency of power generation and reducing dependence on imports of Russian energy resources (It is worth noting that the Belarusian authorities seem to be particularly interested in projects relating to energy)
- Developing and pursuing small town adjustment programs (solving problems of small towns’ big enterprises);
- Developing a program of ‘Flagship’ privatisation and modernisation of key industrial enterprises;
- Investing into projects Belarus could participate on multilateral basis, such as connection of the Northern and Southern branches of Druzhba pipeline (Baltic-Black Sea Collector) or linking Odessa-Brody pipeline to Mozyr refinery;
- Creation of a free trade zone with the EU and promoting Belarus’ accession to the WTO.
- Developing a program of scientific cooperation to ensure Belarus’ exports of high-tech products to the EU and promoting linkages between EU businesses and Belarusian scientific establishments.

The EU should engage in presentation of these projects to the Belarusian society by hosting events and debates, engaging experts and policy makers, pursuing media campaigns, soliciting expertises and opinions.

3. Expanding the role of civil society in the EaP

While a civil society forum is already part of the EaP architecture, it is essential that the role of civil society is not limited to just one platform. In fact, **a spirit and practices of partnership and cooperation between state and civil society should be nourished**

and promoted at all stages and in all programmes. Ideally, civil society groups should have a voice in approval of all main EaP activities and be a tool of control and transparency.

It is therefore essential that EaP programmes are not fully government-oriented and administered through centralised sources. Independent NGO groups ought to be fully-fledged participants in the EaP. This can be achieved through

- Extending invitation to NGO groups to monitor the political and human rights situation and provide assessments of partnership initiatives, e.g. their environmental or human rights impact and establishing a platform for consultation and dialogue between government and civil society representatives
- Making sure that that civil society exchanges and events form an integral part of the EaP and that a significant number of such events is held in 'problem' countries, such as Belarus.
- Investing in capacity building of civil societies, thereby enabling their active participation in EaP programmes.

4. Sponsoring and promoting political dialogue inside Belarus

- Initiating discussions about the long-term political future of the country, including the prospects of its European integration.
- Sponsoring and promoting all possible forms of dialogues between European elites and Belarusian authorities, between Belarusian officials and civil society.
- Promoting a perspective of a possible negotiated scenarios of political and economic transition in the country under the EU guidance and political sponsorship within the context of the European integration.
- Offering a long-term alternative that both sides will find attractive over revolutionary scenarios or Russian meddling.

5. Making the full use of the multilateral track to ensure Belarus' engagement in regional initiatives and projects.

- Encouraging participation of Belarus in the EU flagship projects as a tool of socialising, promotion of reforms, boosting administrative capacities, and reorienting economic and geopolitical linkages of the country. (In particular, the EU could study the possibility of engaging with Belarus and neighbouring countries on projects relating to energy security, transit infrastructure, and transportation. Such projects may include linking of the Northern and Southern branches of the Druzhba pipeline, extension of the the Odessa-Brody pipeline to the Mozyr refinery, construction of a Ukraine-Belarus-Lithuania energy bridge; construction of transport and logistical facilities on the territory of Belarus to be used by European businesses, etc.)
- Economic and administrative reforms aimed at ensuring positive business climate, protection of investments; establishing the rule of law and approximation of business and legal practices with the European standards; ensuring the proper management of the joint infrastructure, should be required as condition for such projects to be taken part.

It is worth noting that appointing a coordinator in Brussels dealing exclusively with the EaP should facilitate the implementation of programmes.