Commentary
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Belarus-EU Relations: Uneven Rapprochement

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Summary

The first three months of 2019 already saw a series of positive developments in the normalization of relations between Belarus and the European Union. Yet, the process remains not only slow, but also contradictory. This is one of the conclusions that came out of a March 5 government meeting on foreign policy, held by Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

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According to the Minsk Barometer, a bimonthly monitor of Belarusian foreign policy and regional security in Europe's East, in the last six months Minsk's relations with the EU and several key member states have been more dynamic than with any other foreign partners. Recent developments this past January and February clearly reflected this trend. For example, in mid-January, Minsk received the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and his Austrian counterpart, Karin Kneissl. The latter arrived to open her country's embassy in the Belarusian capital. Belarus also started preparing for the upcoming visit of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz—yet another sign of the strengthening relationship between Minsk and Vienna.

At the beginning of February, Belarusian Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas paid a visit to Italy, the first such bilateral meeting in nearly a decade. Later that month, another noteworthy visit took place as a delegation led by the chairperson of the Council of the Republic (upper chamber of Belarus's parliament), Mikhail Myasnikovich, spent four days in Poland and held talks with all key Polish political figures, including the president, prime minister, speakers of both parliament chambers, and the foreign minister. The unprecedented level at which the Belarusian delegation was received in Warsaw seems to point to serious intentions on both sides to improve relations.

Minsk's cooperation with EU institutions has also intensified. On February 18, Lukashenka and Rumas held meetings with the European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources Günther Oettinger. According to the EU official, the talks were successful and Brussels is considering the possibility of increasing funding for joint projects. In addition, positive developments are occurring in relations with EU-affiliated financial institutions. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development provided a record amount of investments in Belarus in 2018. Moreover, cooperation with the European Investment Bank is just beginning, with the first multi-million-dollar agreements signed at the end of 2018.

Finally, trade volumes between Belarus and the EU have also been on the rise. In 2018, Belarus's exports to the common European market grew by about 30 percent, and Minsk hopes they will soon reach the record-high level of $26.9 billion, registered back in 2012.

However, all these developments have not yet led to significant qualitative progress in Belarusian-EU relations.

> Most telling is the fact that, after years of talks, and despite multiple statements alluding to imminent success, no politically important agreement has been concluded.

In particular, negotiations have stalled regarding a visa facilitation agreement and on so-called partnership priorities. The former would simplify visa application procedures and lower visa costs for Belarusian nationals traveling to the EU; and the latter is intended as an interim bilateral agreement until Minsk and Brussels conclude a full-fledged one (for example, an updated version of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement).

Progress on the partnership priorities has been blocked by Lithuania's position on the Belarusian nuclear power plant, under construction in Astravets. Vilnius keeps putting out new demands each time Belarus has made a concession. As a result, there is firm belief in Minsk that nothing less than the closure of the nuclear power plant project will satisfy Lithuania, which Belarus cannot accept. Lithuania's intractable position has been causing growing irritation among other EU member states; nevertheless, Vilnius continues to block any progress on a partnership priorities agreement with Minsk.

Meanwhile, visa facilitation negotiations seem even more frustrating for the Belarusian government. On several occasions, after diplomats had reached a preliminary agreement on the text, EU institutions or individual member states suddenly submitted new conditions. For example, a breakthrough was accomplished at the end of 2018, when Brussels consented to exclude a paragraph from the agreement that laid out a

suspension mechanism in case the situation on the ground changed. Minsk had objected to that clause because no similar mechanism is mentioned in any EU agreements with other post-Soviet states. However, the apparent consensus on the draft EU-Belarusian agreement was suddenly punctured by a new condition put forth by Warsaw – that Minsk should accept more Polish consuls – further delaying the conclusion of the already-protracted negotiations.

Another source of frustration in Minsk is trade. Petrochemicals (produced from Russian crude oil) make up most of Belarusian exports to the EU. Therefore, Minsk is looking for ways to diversify trade relations along its western flank. In particular, Belarus is trying to carve out market access for its agricultural products. But despite promising declarations to the contrary, the European Commission has continued to maintain trade barriers on Belarusian foodstuffs and seems unwilling to even start proper negotiations.

At the same time, Brussels has its own reasons to feel frustrated with the limited qualitative progress in relations with Minsk.

> To begin with, EU diplomats think that the overall situation regarding human rights and democracy in Belarus needs further improvement. And certain actions by Minsk only reinforce such views.

The so-called "Belta case" is a recent example, wherein the authorities opened a criminal investigation into several journalists and news outlets accused of stealing content from a state-run news agency. Leaving aside the legal implications of this matter, the law enforcement agencies' handling of this case was a public relations disaster for the Belarusian authorities. Furthermore, it fueled the arguments of opponents to Belarusian-Western rapprochement.

Another persistent contentious issue is Belarus's retention of capital punishment. Many in Minsk see EU demands to introduce a moratorium on the policy as a double standard, as Brussels does not demand the same from its partners the US or Japan. But most EU officials see no possibilities for further progress in relations with Belarus unless it applies such a moratorium.

In short, the core problem behind the uneven rapprochement is the persistent lack of trust on both sides. Improved communication and more joint projects in recent year have been crucial for trust-building. But much more work remains to be done.

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