Commentary
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# Lessons from EU-Belarus Relations: Is interdependence the neighbourhood strategy for a “geopolitical EU”?

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**Summary**

In light of the increasing “great-power” competition and despite the EU’s ambition to become an influential global player, the Union has so far demonstrated little ability to navigate the challenges Belarus poses. Analysing the poor track record of EU-Belarus relations offers important lessons.

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## Functionalist logic and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

The theorists of ***functionalism*** in international relations have long argued that there is a correlation between the degree of economic interdependence and political alignment. To contextualize it: the more extensive economic cooperation and interdependence between the EU and its neighbours are, the greater the **leverage and possibilities** to shape political developments in the neighbourhood.

Following this logic, enhanced economic cooperation fosters **connectivity and establishes interdependence**, which in turn not only creates political leverage but expands it over time.

If anything, the logic of the ENP has long been the **opposite**. It tried building on the rationale of enlargement, which until the 2000s was widely **seen** as the EU's most successful foreign policy. The **"everything but institutions"** ENP believed in the same premise: the EU's large and lucrative market, its financial power, and high living standards were supposed to incentivise partner countries to implement reforms in exchange for the "carrots" of closer cooperation with the EU.

Symbolically, in 2011 the Union decided that its neighbourly relations would be guided by the **"more for more"** principle: Brussels promised stronger partnerships to those neighbours that progressed faster in **democratic reforms.**

## The special case of Belarus

Belarus has long been an abnormal case in the EU's neighbourhood. After 1996, the EU did not recognise a single election there as free and fair and, thus, questioned the legitimacy of the Belarusian authorities. As a result, EU-Belarus relations have mostly been marked by political tensions. Revealingly, Belarus is the only country in the neighbourhood that still has no **basic agreement** with the EU.

This legal and political void in the relationship has had two key negative effects. *First*, it significantly narrowed opportunities for cooperation, including in the **economic** realm. *Second*, and as a result, it marginalised the EU's leverage vis-à-vis Minsk, which became strikingly obvious after Belarus's 2020 presidential election.

To put it bluntly, the Lukashenko government mostly ignores the EU's **views and demands**. On the contrary, Russia, which is deeply interconnected with Minsk, remains the only geopolitical game in town.

## Conditionality approach outdated across the neighbourhood?

While the conditionality-based approach has met with mixed results in the past, today, it appears to be exhausting itself in the neighbourhood. The most advanced reformers have already passed or are about to **pass** all politically attractive milestones foreseen by the neighbourhood package: e.g., the association agreements and visa-free travel in the Eastern Partnership.

The next logical milestone, which could sustain the EU's leverage vis-à-vis its partners, would be a membership perspective. However, this is hardly realistic in the short-term. And vis-à-vis its neighbours without membership ambitions, it is even more obvious

that the EU will not be able to gain geopolitical relevance through the traditional ENP method. Hence, the concept of conditionality will now **grow increasingly outdated** in the ENP.

> **Graph 1:** The intensity and nature of Belarus-EU relations in 2011-2021 | Copyright: Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations. The Minsk Barometer uses event-analysis for quantifying foreign policy activities. It includes instances of mutual diplomatic interactions (including visits and high-level contacts, agreements signed, diplomats’ expulsions, etc.), as well as new relevant documents adopted and public statements made by the Belarusian side. Those are rated according to an established scale. The full methodological note in Russian is **here**. The studies did not cover the period between January 2017 and February 2018.

## Instead: a wise management of interdependencies

It is here that the *functionalist* logic offers an instrumental alternative, especially if the EU aspires for geopolitical indispensability. In other words, the EU should be ready to **offer broad economic cooperation** opportunities to its neighbours unconditionally, while expecting pragmatically that this will strengthen structural interdependencies and, thus, generate greater leverage and possibilities to guide political developments across the whole neighbourhood.

Overall, the EU should **prepare to deal with increasingly more difficult and transactional neighbours** than what has been the case so far. This is where the experience of EU-Belarus relations can become helpful.

This does not mean the EU should give up its **value orientation**. The aim of such an alternative strategy – an “update” of the *functionalist* logic – would be to identify strategic options for strengthening the neighbourhood and the EU to mutual benefit in relevant fields – infrastructure, future technologies – in such a way that the EU’s impact on a positive, rules-based and stable development in the neighbourhood can grow.

> **Table 1:** Belarus’s trade in goods with the EU in 2012-2018, in $ billion. Copyright: MFA Belarus (2020)

> **Table 2: Belarus’s trade in goods with Russia in 2012-2019, in $ billion. Copyright: MFA Belarus (2020)**

## EU-Belarus relations: Diplomacy and economic cooperation

While **EU-Belarus relations** have largely remained in the “negative zone” since the 1990s, some periods saw their relative normalisation. The last decade is particularly reflective of the changing diplomatic dynamic and its implications for economic cooperation.

If we juxtapose the data from Graph 1 with the data on **EU-Belarus trade**, we see no direct correlation between political and economic dimensions has existed in the relationship. As Table 1 shows, bilateral trade did not suffer from strained political relations. In fact, the opposite trend was observed! In 2012, when the political dialogue remained nearly **frozen**, trade and Belarusian exports to the EU were at their highest. And as the political relations started to improve, trade plummeted.

Interestingly, because the lion’s share of Belarusian exports consisted of petrochemicals produced from Russian crude oil, **trade** between Belarus and the EU was more a function of Belarus-Russia economic relations than political agreements between Minsk and the EU. This is substantiated by comparing Belarus’s imports statistics with Russia (Table 2) and exports statistics with the EU (Table 1).

## Opportunity lost

Thus, the data from 2011-2021 proves wrong the expectation that enhanced political relations with a difficult partner are likely to automatically **spill over** into the economic and legal realms – which would be the *functionalist* logic reversed. The 2016-2020 rapprochement between the EU and Belarus resulted in only one legal advancement – the conclusion of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements in 2020.

Even though by 2017, Minsk started proposing that negotiations on a framework agreement be launched and expressed strong interest in **deepening** economic ties. However, Brussels conditioned further progress in economic cooperation and institutional convergence on Minsk’s human rights and democracy performance, including the capital punishment issue.

EU officials assumed that Belarus’s interest in **expanding economic ties** would empower them with political leverage vis-à-vis Minsk and that such leverage could be utilised in the conditionality logic. In the end, not only did Belarus fail to make any progress on human rights and democracy – or capital punishment– but from the *functionalist* perspective, the EU lost an opportunity to increase economic interdependence when the political environment looked most favourable.

## Interdependent enough to hurt, but not to shape behaviour

The current **crisis in EU-Belarus relations** reveals that the sides are, in fact, interdependent, which reflects the “destiny of geography.” But the degree of their interdependence is so basic that it is only enough to make Minsk and Brussels capable of hurting each other if they choose to do so. Yet, it is not sufficient to empower them with positive leverage – the ability to shape each other’s decision-making in mutually beneficial ways.

The EU’s attempts to **force Minsk** to reverse its domestic policy course by introducing sanctions have not been productive politically. On the contrary, tensions inside Belarus have further escalated: Minsk **responded** by increasing its crackdown on **political opponents** and **NGOs** inside the country and suspending participation in the Eastern Partnership and the 2020 readmission agreement.

**Russia** meanwhile has enhanced its interconnectedness with Belarus, and Minsk seems to have become determined to demonstrate its geostrategic significance by triggering a regional security predicament at the common border with the EU.

The situation today would look different had the EU and Belarus succeeded in managing their **societal and economic cooperation** in a way that qualitatively expanded their interdependence to mutual benefit in 2015-2020 – to focus on managing problematic relations over fixing them. Leverage cannot be acquired by reacting with demands and sanctions only to a crisis in progress. One needs to think beyond buzzword-ish concepts like “strategic autonomy” – and focus on the practicalities of increasing the Union’s geostrategic relevance, especially in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood, where the Union’s core interests and vulnerabilities lie. To achieve this goal, managing societal and economic interdependencies with neighbours wisely should be considered to replace the traditional enlargement-modelled conditionality approach.

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