

Despite souring relations, the EU should avoid the temptation to further disengage with Belarus and enhance its policy of critical engagement.

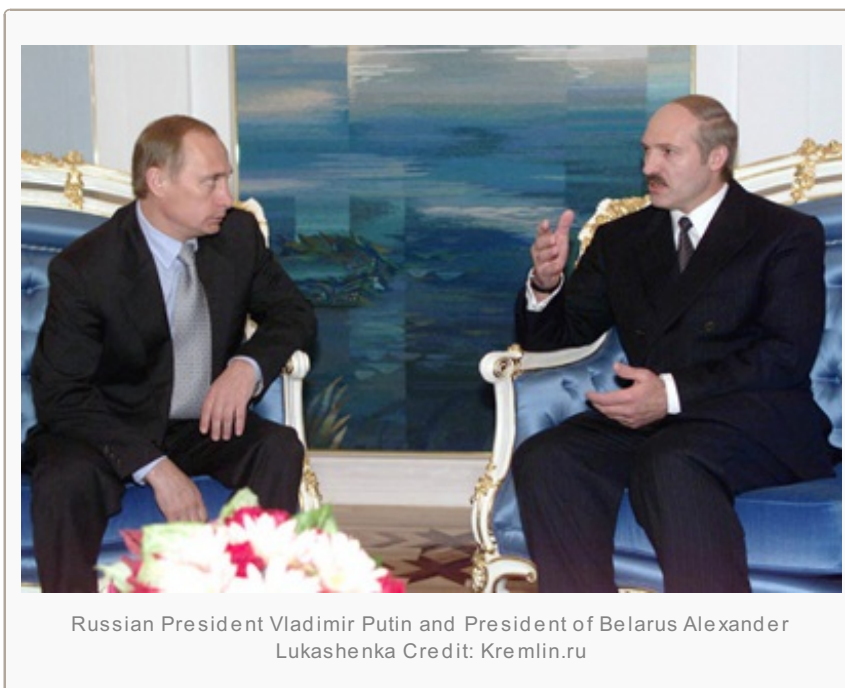
by Blog Admin

Considered by many to be Europe's 'last dictatorship' under President Alexander Lukashenka, Belarus's relations with the EU have been in decline for several years, despite initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership. **Giselle Bosse** warns that instead of disengaging, the EU should continue its policy of critical engagement with the country by building the capacity of Belarusian civil society and being more realistic and specific about its policy goals.



After several years of gradual rapprochement and pragmatic engagement, EU-Belarus relations hit rock bottom after rigged presidential elections in December 2010 and the subsequent violent crackdown of opposition protests by the Belarusian regime. Relations worsened in 2011 and 2012, when the EU extended its sanctions on the regime and key economic actors. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe also judged September's parliamentary elections as neither free nor fair. Not surprisingly, the EU's institutions and member states have become increasingly frustrated with the regime in Belarus, which is often described as the 'last dictatorship' in Europe. Neither isolation, nor the new 'critical engagement' policy with Belarus under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009 (an EU initiative aimed at developing closer relations with the countries of Europe's east) appear to have had any impact on the government of President Lukashenka. Yet, at the same time, the country's managed economy depends more than ever on Russia to provide loans, subsidize energy supplies, and grant access to the regional market.

In light of these developments, there is a real possibility that the EU will further disengage with Belarus, or simply put relations with the country on the political backburner until sometime before the next presidential elections in 2015. That scenario, however, seems the least desirable for the EU. The (already limited) leverage over the regime would further decrease and disengagement is likely to impact negatively on the (already decreasing) support for the EU among the Belarusian population. Instead of further disengagement, the EU should improve the effectiveness of its critical engagement policy with Belarus.



Even though critical engagement did not yield any significant results in terms of democratic reform in the short term, it is important to remember that the policy was based on the idea of *gradual change through engagement*, which is essentially a long term strategy. And indeed, there is much sense in the words of Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt, who argued early on in the EaP process that it was rather overoptimistic to expect that the EU would achieve democracy in Belarus by 'next Wednesday'. Given that overall context, critical engagement did also have several positive effects. First, it generated an unprecedented interest in Belarus within the EU, and with it a greater awareness and understanding of the country among EU officials. Second, that awareness further

increased dialogue with the Belarusian government, and with civil society at large. Third, the engagement generated additional funds for projects (albeit still very limited in scale and reach) which raised the profile of the EU. Fourth, the EaP Civil Society Forum enabled Belarusian civil society to network more systematically (although the political influence of the CSF as such is negligible). Fifth, Lukashenka did introduce some reforms, though these mainly concerned legislation pertaining to foreign investments.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons to assume that the EU is likely to move towards a policy of disengagement with Belarus. First, the EU's current financial crisis means that the EU will become more inward-looking in the next few years, and financial assistance for external relations will decrease (or at best stay at its current level). At an average of €28 million per year, EU financial assistance to Belarus is very limited, and incomparable to the large-scale loans that the country receives from Russia (or China) which exceed several billions of dollars. Second, the EU's foreign policy agenda will continue to be dominated by events in its southern neighbourhood (Syria, Arab Spring countries), which has already led to decreased levels of interest in the Eastern Partnership this year. Third and as already hinted at earlier in this text, the EU's leverage over Belarus vis-à-vis Russia is decreasing. Apart from the dependence on Russian loans and energy resources, Belarus has recently joined the Single Economic Space (SES) with Russia and Kazakhstan, and is likely to come under significant pressure from Russia to further integrate into the Eurasian Economic Community (or even a Eurasian Economic Union by 2015).

In my policy paper on *'The EU and Belarus: perpetual tango all over again?'* for the European Policy Centre (24 September 2012) I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the EU's critical engagement policy towards Belarus, and its current two-pronged approach based on targeted sanctions against the Belarusian authorities on the one hand, while trying to intensify dialogue with, and support for, civil society and citizens on the other. Taking into account the geopolitics and geo-economics of Russia's relations with Belarus (and with the EU), expectations of what the EU can achieve in Belarus should be lowered. Lower expectations should, however, not lead to disinterest or disengagement. Instead, I argue in favour of a continuation of the EU's policy of critical engagement and outline five measures to improve the current policy:

1. The EU should continue to place the individuals directly involved on its visa blacklist. Sanctions should only be applied more generally if the EU establishes clear criteria regarding which actions count as support for the regime and which do not.
2. Member states and EU institutions should not circumvent their own sanction regimes, such as the purchase of dual-use equipment for border assistance projects.
3. The EU should strategically target and develop the capacity of civil society over a sustained period of time. The Civil Society Facility (which aims to strengthen the capacity of non-state actors) should function as a top-up of existing programmes, not as a means of disguising funding reductions for existing programmes.
4. There is no automatic guarantee that the EU's engagement with the Belarusian authorities will lead to the movement of officials towards democracy. However, if the EU does place greater emphasis on building the capacity of Belarusian public administration in 2012/13, efforts should be made to implement meaningful assistance projects.
5. The EU could be more specific about the goals of its policy. Are the sanctions meant to 'punish' particular individuals for human rights violations, to 'annoy Lukashenka', or simply to signal that the EU 'is doing something' about autocratic regimes in its neighbourhood? And what is the longer term goal: to push Lukashenka to introduce reforms, or regime change?

This article is based on the European Policy Centre Paper: ['The EU and Belarus: perpetual tango all over again?'](#).

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