

The EU has successfully pursued a strategy of democracy promotion by technocratic means in Belarus

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/10/06/the-eu-has-successfully-pursued-a-strategy-of-democracy-promotion-by-technocratic-means-in-belarus/

06/10/2014

Belarus is often depicted as the 'last dictatorship in Europe' and is generally regarded as being more strongly oriented toward Russia rather than the EU and the West. Using extensive research in the country conducted between 2009 and 2013, [Elena A. Korosteleva](#) highlights that while on the outside it appears to be 'business as usual' in Belarus, the last five years have witnessed a significant change in public attitudes toward the EU and the growth of a more 'European' identity. Noting that this change in attitudes has occurred alongside the EU's pursuit of a largely technocratic approach to engaging with the country, she argues that democracy promotion in Belarus' case may work better when depoliticised and inculcated into the daily lives of individuals through norms, regulations and practices of international order.



Is Belarus an unwavering constant in international relations: a maverick, isolated from the West, and increasingly entangled into the Russian – now Eurasian – sphere of influence? On the surface, it seems to be business-as-usual: Lukashenko's regime remains unchallenged, customarily [depicted](#) as 'the last dictatorship in Europe'. Belarus' relations with the international community – and the EU especially – have shown little sign of change since the mid-1990s, and at best could be described as spasmodic.

All official attempts so far – from the [Partnership and Co-operation Agreement](#) in 1995, the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership Initiative in 2004/9, to a Joint Interim Plan in 2010, and a Dialogue on Modernisation in 2012 – have either been thwarted or simply had no effect. Meanwhile, Belarus' relations with its eastern neighbours continue apace, though more through compulsion than by free will. By 2010 Belarus had become part of the [Eurasian Customs Union](#) (ECU) and by May 2014 it jointly signed a [Eurasian Economic Union](#) launch agreement.

So, as it seems, Belarus' domestic and international relations remain emphatically stagnant, reflecting a predictable status-quo – or do they? Two critical disjunctures challenge a seemingly enduring order. The first refers to the Belarusian government's quiet but persistent discourse of resistance to Russia's overbearing influence, manifested in the sabotaging of its ECU membership, [petty wars](#) over trade/economic issues, and, more tellingly, in publicly endorsing Petro Poroshenko's leadership in Ukraine and [objecting](#) to Russia's demands to extend an economic and political embargo to the country.

The second disjuncture is far more emblematic of the existing undercurrents, exposing profound longitudinal changes in public opinion and behaviour. I and several co-researchers have conducted extensive [survey research](#) in Belarus, with our findings indicating that over the last five years there has been: a significant rise in public interest, congruence and affinity with the EU; a growing sense of clarity and recognition of EU competencies in specific areas and their mapping against the needs and interests of the population; and, most importantly, a new



Victory Square in Minsk, Credit: Marco Fieber (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

sense of identity premised on a more critical evaluation of the Self and of the government, and legitimisation of European standards. To this end, relations with Russia (and the ECU) are no longer seen as a default option for Belarus; and a new 'European' identity endures as a narrative hitherto absent from the public discourse.

This indicates an on-going process of socialisation into a wider European space, and even suggests that the EU, despite the limited official dialogue, might have been doing something right, to succeed in expanding the boundaries of public learning. Hence, what has the EU been doing *unnoticed*, and how does it matter for democracy promotion?

The EU's approach to date

The EU had initially struggled to secure allegiance from the partner countries in the east, and Belarus in particular. In 2011, however, the Commission substantively revisited its approach, which marked a turning point in EU engagement. Three particular aspects are worth noting.

Firstly, the new measures have become more versatile, expanding the panoply of instruments, programmes and actors. For Belarus it amounted to almost €60 million in the [European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument](#) support for 2012-13 alone (a six-fold increase from 2007-11). Secondly, the new approach became more inclusive, targeting all levels of society. In Belarus, there are currently 59 on-going projects, with over 150 successfully completed in the past ten years and many continued on the European Commission's [assessment](#). Most successful initiatives are at the local and regional levels: e.g. [BELMED](#), [RELOAD-2](#), the [Cross-Border Cooperation \(CBC\)](#) programme, and the [Comprehensive Institution Building \(CIB\)](#) initiative. Thirdly, and most importantly, the EU's approach has become more technocratic, sector-driven, and low-key, enabling norms' codification and their inculcation into the daily practices of Belarusian people.

Democracy by technocracy?

The EU's non-linear technocratic approach, counter-intuitively, and in the absence of political dialogue, seems to have induced public socialisation and recognition of the EU as an alternative partner to Russia. This may well be, as evidence attests, via Belarus' continued exposure to international norms and social empowerment at grass-root levels.

First, despite the limited official dialogue, the EU has succeeded in engaging, not through high politics, but rather via sector-cooperation under the CIB, CBC, and other small-scale projects, which now render new language of norms and practices, and in some cases, even structures. But the instances of joint ventures are still scarce. For example, it is politically short-sighted to exclude Belarus' participation from the [EURONEST](#) Parliamentary Assembly, the value of which, as [Petrova and Raube](#) argue, is about emulating EU practices of good governance. There is also little incentivisation occurring to integrate Belarus into the World Trade Organisation community, now that it is part of the ECU. As Beate Jahn has [argued](#), 'practitioners of democracy promotion "should care at least as much about the WTO" as they do about the impact of assistance for elections or support for civil society'.

Second, if 'the international' matters for codifying people-to-people contacts, and socialising them into the practices of 'good governance', and not as spasmodic occasions but rather as a continuing effort; 'social empowerment' is another dimension that ensures translation of 'codes' into daily behaviours of individuals. As David Chandler [argues](#), democracy-building is less about high politics, but more about the relevance of 'problems' to people's daily lives: e.g. when households malfunction, citizens should know how to collectively resolve the problem, and consequently be in charge and less tolerant of existing inadequacies in their daily lives. This is where de-politicisation of democracy is vital. Gradual change observed in public attitudes and behavioural patterns in Belarus attests to the merits of the above approach and renders some useful insights into how low-level pragmatic engagement with various local stakeholders may alter public understanding of politics, and of the workings of democracy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor

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