

Minsk boycotts the Eastern Partnership summit

Kamil Kłysiński

The Belarusian government refused to send its foreign minister Syarhey Martynau to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit in Warsaw (29-30 September), in response to the lack of an invitation for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and sent its ambassador to Poland Viktor Haysenok instead. The Belarusian ambassador's participation in the summit was reduced because of his low rank, and so Minsk boycotted the summit altogether in response. At the same time, the Belarusian government declared that all documents adopted without their participation would have no legal force, and sharply criticised the EU for departing from the principle of equal respect for the interests of sovereign states covered by the Eastern Partnership program. As a result, only the Belarusian opposition was present at the summit. The EU member states unanimously adopted a declaration in which they reiterated their conditions for returning to dialogue with Minsk (specifically the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners). Meanwhile a draft EU aid package for Belarus with a total value of approximately US\$9 billion was presented, which can only be implemented after Brussels' demands have been met. The joint final declaration failed to include any criticism of the Belarusian regime for its repression of the opposition because of a opposition from the Eastern Partnership's member states.

Commentary

- Everything points to the fact that the Belarusian government consciously boycotted the meeting. Lukashenka wanted to demonstrate his strength and inflexibility towards the EU to the Belarusian *nomenklatura*, so that in the face of the growing crisis he can further consolidate and strengthen the ruling camp around himself. Moreover, the Belarusian president sent the EU a signal that he still wants to define the scope and conditions for his country's dialogue with Brussels. The Belarusian government sees cooperation with the EU (including participation in the EaP) as primarily an opportunity to develop trade, and attract investments and financial support.
- In refusing to participate in the summit and threatening to quit the EaP, Minsk hoped to sow divisions among the EU states regarding policy towards Belarus, while seeking support from the other five EaP partner countries. But this success for Belarusian diplomacy proved to be incomplete. Only the post-Soviet members of the EaP opposed the criticism of Minsk in the summit's final declaration, because of their individual interests and political-economic considerations in their relations with Belarus.

- Lukashenka's blackmail is a classic Belarusian foreign policy manoeuvre. However, although these activities have proved to be effective in previous years, at this point – during a situation of deep crisis in the Belarusian economy and under pressure from Russia – the end result can only be to further deepen the regime's self-isolation on the international stage. This shows the progression of the crisis, apparent now for many months, in Lukashenka's authoritarian system, which is no longer able to act effectively on the international stage.