

Stability, not values: the EU lifts sanctions against Belarus

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On 15 February, the EU Council decided not to extend its visa and economic sanctions against 170 representatives of the Belarusian regime and three companies linked to the Belarusian government. At the same time, sanctions against four people suspected of involvement in the disappearance of President Aleksandr Lukashenko's opponents in the years 1999-2000, and the embargo on sales of arms and military equipment to Belarus, were maintained. The sanctions were introduced in December 2010, in response to the brutal repression of the political opposition and civil society, but they were suspended in October 2015 in response to signs of liberalisation in Belarus. However over recent months, the situation in the areas of human rights and civil liberties has not undergone the expected improvement in any of the relevant issues.

The EU's decision is not a reaction to any democratising actions by the Belarusian authorities, but is rather a political choice. Brussels has come to the conclusion that the policy of sanctions has not brought about the expected changes, and has actually weakened its political and economic position in Belarus vis-à-vis Russia. At the same time, the EU has welcomed Minsk's balanced position in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and is beginning to appreciate the stability of Belarus, in contrast with the situation in Ukraine and the EU's southern neighbourhood. The Council's decision will strengthen Minsk's political position vis-à-vis Moscow, and will also make it easier for Belarus to activate the programme of support from the International Monetary Fund to stabilise the country's finances.

No expressions of political liberalisation

In October 2015 the EU Council decided to suspend the sanctions for a period of four months, i.e. until the end of February, in reaction to the release of all political prisoners and the peaceful conduct of the presidential elections held on 11 October last year. In deciding to suspend the sanctions until the end of this February, the EU was sending the Belarusian authorities a signal that it expected more action to liberalise domestic policy. However, there has been no improvement in the areas of respect for human rights and democratic principles in Belarus over the past few months. Despite refraining from stricter forms of repression, such as arrests and prison sentences, limiting its punishments to fines, and the forces of law and order not using violence to pacify the occasional demonstrations, the Belarusian regime has not rehabilitated its political prisoners, and has also blocked the registration of many social organisations, political parties and independent media, and threatened their representatives with imprisonment for their activities. Attention has been drawn to these and a number of other aspects in recent weeks in open letters to the EU from

Belarusian human rights defenders and the leaders of major opposition parties. They stressed the need for the EU to develop a new 'road map' in its relations with Belarus, making the development of cooperation dependent on genuine liberalisation measures on the part of the regime. In a statement on 10 February, the UN's special rapporteur for Belarus, Miklós Haraszti, also declared his scepticism about the situation in Belarus. In addition the final report (published on 28 January) by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), regarding the monitoring of the presidential election in October 2015, clearly stated that both the voting and the counting had undergone a number of infringements, which meant they could not be considered free and democratic processes. In view of the above, the ODIHR recommended that the authorities of Belarus amend the country's legislation in order to bring the electoral laws up to democratic standards.

The EU's minimal policy towards Minsk

In the absence of any signs of political liberalisation in Belarus, the EU's decision to abolish almost all its sanctions against the Belarusian regime is primarily politically motivated. Brussels has long made clear its appreciation of how Aleksandr Lukashenko conducts a foreign policy autonomous from Russia, particularly regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The talks in Minsk on resolving the conflict in Ukraine, culminating in a series of agreements, and the maintenance of good relations with Kyiv have given Lukashenko space for a rapprochement with the EU. From the EU's perspective, Belarus's relative internal stability is crucial, all the more so in the context of Russia's aggressive actions in Eastern Europe. In this situation, in Belarus's relations with the West, the problem of the Belarusian regime violating principles of human rights and democracy has gradually begun to move into the background, and it has become much more important to establish dialogue with the Belarusian government. At the same time, a belief has been rising for many months among EU member states that sanctions are ineffective, and hence there is a need to move towards encouraging policy changes through cooperation. In addition, some EU countries are increasingly interested in developing economic relations with Belarus, as can clearly be seen in Germany and Austria; on 9 February, the latter opened an embassy in Minsk, and is working on organising a Belarusian-Austrian investment forum in Vienna.

A chance for Lukashenko

The decision to lift the sanctions clearly marks the start of another opening in relations with the EU, which is very beneficial for the Belarusian authorities (the previous phase of rapprochement between the EU and Belarus lasted from 2008 until the end of 2010, and ended with the Belarusian regime's brutal assault on the opposition after the previous presidential elections). Aleksandr Lukashenko has thus gained a significant gesture of support from the West, and most importantly, without having had to make any political changes which could have risked the stability of his authoritarian system of power. The EU has thus deprived itself of a basic instrument for putting pressure on Minsk, and it should therefore not expect any real improvement this year in the fields of observing human rights and democratic principles. The Belarusian regime will simply try to conduct a more limited policy of repression, while at the same time it will feign a desire to cooperate, including by

announcing it will consider some of the ODIHR'S recommendations for changes in the electoral law.

For Lukashenko the undoubted advantage of resuming political dialogue with the EU is that it strengthens his position towards Russia, which is expecting greater loyalty from Minsk in foreign policy, as well as closer military cooperation, including on the issue of consent to locate a Russian fighter base near Bobruysk.

It is possible that the improvement of Belarus's relationship with Brussels will also thaw relations between Minsk and Washington, the more so as the US generally takes the position of Brussels into account when making its decisions on Belarus, and the American (travel and financial) sanctions expire at the end of April.

The economic benefits will be no less important; the lifting of sanctions will allow Belarus to gain access to EU aid, and improve both its credit rating and its attractiveness to investors. However, most important for Minsk at present would be the highly likely return to talks with the International Monetary Fund on a \$3 billion assistance program that will replenish the record-low foreign exchange reserves, and thus stabilise the country's economic situation at least until the parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for September this year.

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