

Belarus and the EU: New Opportunities or Manifestations of Cynicism?

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Visit of the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana to Belarus gave a new impetus to the discussions related to the EU and Belarus dialogue. This event may be assessed both rationally and emotionally. Thinking in rational terms this seems to be a clear-cut signal to Minsk that the EU is prepared to commence a new stage of pragmatic relations. On the one hand, this stands to reason since a passive stance and attempts to isolate Belarus brought no concrete results. On the other hand, assessing those alterations emotionally, an impression is formed that the EU made a cynical and amoral step by forgetting all sins of the regime.

Inconsistency of the EU

Two years ago the EU proclaimed a document to the authorities of Belarus wherein it clearly pointed out that the democratic reforms were a precondition for a closer cooperation. Prior to the election of 2008 A. Lukashenka's regime released political prisoners, gave a permit to register the movement of the former competitor A. Milinkevich and lifted the ban from two opposition newspapers. There were different opinions – from positive asserting that those were essential changes, to pessimistic claiming that those alterations were simply cosmetic.

Nevertheless, in the opinion of the expert on Belarus Alexandra Goujon (Bourgogne University, France) “Having made some concessions to its opponents and having slackened the rein, an authoritarian regime fails to become democratic, it simply becomes less authoritarian”. This way or another, dynamics of the EU-Belarus relations shows that the majority of the Brussels' requirements are if not forgotten, then simply not emphasized. True, J. Solana has met some of the opposition representatives but even after that stricter statements or concrete proposals related to human rights and democratic values were not made.

Content of the Meeting

Irrespective of the fact that many people consider the meeting of J. Solana with the Belarusian authorities to be an unprecedented event, the basic question that arises is related to the content of the given meeting. As Antoliy Lebedko, one of the Belarusian opposition leaders argues, “It is not the visit that is important, it is what J. Solana’s briefcase contained”. Comments of the EU foreign policy leader and his answers to the journalists’ questions give no clue what the results of the visit might be. Belarusian leader also stayed secretive.

It is hardly feasible that for the Belarusian society, that found itself in the mist of high-sounding phrases about the “constructive dialogue” and “discussion of the essential problems”, the policy of the EU seems transparent. Let alone the fact that so far the EU failed to draw up an action plan for the normalization of the EU and Belarus relations. A plan that would provide for the measurable criteria to assess the progress of the reforms carried out in Belarus.

Situation of the Opposition

Supporters of rational politics would maintain that the work with the Belarusian opposition for more than a decade failed to produce any tangible results. Strict rhetoric and sanctions to the A. Lukashenka’s regime also proved to be the examples of inefficient EU policy.

A. Lebedko argues that the EU passes on to the tête-à-tête dialogue format. A. Lukashenka expressed his wish to communicate with Brussels directly without any mediators – leaders of opposition parties, public actors and non-governmental organizations – quite candidly: “I would like no mediators in our dialogue and especially those who fail to show good will to our country. No mediators inside the country or outside it.”

Supporters of the democratic Belarus find themselves in an ambiguous situation. Representatives of the opposition, who for a long time supported the European values and were thereupon imprisoned by the regime, are not so sure now about the EU stance. J. Solana failed to mention either the

entrepreneurs who were recently imprisoned in Belarus, or the forceful conscription of the leaders of the youth opposition movements, or cosmetic changes of the regime, which are insufficient to commence a mutual dialogue. In its turn, making use of the Brussels' silence Belarusian regime receives a chance to find out what the limits of the behaviour that may be tolerated by the EU are.

Especially skeptical in this sense was one of the independent Belarusian expert Viacheslav Pazdnyak. According to the analyst, within the context of the dispersal of peaceful demonstrations and the act of the burning of the EU flag by the police officers in Minsk, reaction of the EU is inadequate and worsening its image.

Causes of the Changes

Changes in the EU foreign policy towards Belarus were called forth by some factors. First, the absence of a long-term strategy related to Belarus. EU fails to possess either any clearly defined instruments to influence Belarus, or the strategy and tactics of their use. This gives a possibility to alter the foreign policy course in the light of the existing conditions. And by the end of 2008 the international as well as economic conditions did change considerably.

Second, it is economic factors. It is nobody's secret that quite a few EU states have their economic interests in Belarus. Besides, the consequences of the economic crisis make Minsk start looking for alternative sources itself. Reciprocal interests determine the commercialization of mutual relations.

Third, naturally, is Moscow. On the one hand, it is agreed that if the EU fails to be active in its relations with Belarus, the latter "will find itself" in the sphere of complete influence of Russia. This attitude was consolidated by the Russian aggression in Georgia. On the other hand, it is for some years already that A. Lukashenka himself makes attempts to keep balance between the West and the East. The issue of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is one of the basic Minsk's tools of manipulation.

Thus J. Solana's visit may be assessed in different ways: as a chance for Belarus seeking mutually beneficial cooperation and as cynical step of the EU by keeping silent about human rights and democratic values. However, talking about the chance, we have to ask, whether it is a chance to liberalize the political and social life and economics, or to receive an economic and financial benefit. And, second, is this a chance for the Belarusian society, or a chance for the ruling elite to stay in power?

What has to be done?

Critical attitude to J. Solana's visit does not mean that democratically minded part of the Belarusian society assesses negatively the very dialogue of the EU and Belarus. Such stance simply demonstrates the fear that the representatives of the opposition will not get any chairs in the given dialogue.

Independent Belarusian experts are of the opinion that for the EU and Belarusian dialogue to promote democratic processes, and not the authoritarianism, the European Union must at present devise a plan on the normalization of mutual relations. This means that the delegation of the European Commission in Belarus and the team of the European Commission working with Belarus in Brussels have to be reinforced.

Rationally thinking, actions of the EU seem to be logical – work with the opposition failed to be fruitful, thus alternatives have to be sought. One of them could be an attempt to introduce changes from the top, to tame the authorities and little by little “push forward” the democratic changes. Lithuanian experts, however, are right in stating that EU conditions have to be softer than those of Russia. This means that promotion of democratic values will be very restricted.

The emotional side, seemingly, has the right to fear that cooperation of Belarus and the EU threatens to turn into a real simulation of democratization. Simulation, whereby participants of the dialogue will pursue their economic goals, will publicize cosmetic, allegedly democratic reforms, perhaps some opposition players will be invited to join the game.

There's no use crying over the spilt milk. The visit did take place, democratic values were not mentioned. At present, the main challenge for the EU is to find ways to inform the Belarusian society. To give information on what has been agreed upon. To draw attention to the fact that it is not only the elite of power that is important for the EU, but ordinary people of Belarus as well. To inform that such meetings may not legitimize all crimes committed by the regime. Lithuania as the member state of the EU and the closest neighbour can make an important contribution to the given work.

Otherwise the greater part of the Belarusian society will continue to suppose that humble EU officials arrive to the Minsk Tsar.