
EU FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS – MIXING CHESS WITH CHECKERS

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The European Union was criticized for a lack of coherent strategy towards Belarus. The EU foreign-policy makers have been blamed for inaction as much as for ineffective decisions. However, active versus reactive policies has mostly been discussed.

A number of articles argue that the formula for Belarus's foreign affairs is to create a balance between Moscow and Brussels.¹ Such modus operandi of official Minsk has misled international foreign-policy makers, who reacted either with attempts for dialogue and engagement, or pressure and sanctions.² The policy of applying either engagement or sanctions has never been fully implemented and has usually ended up as a short-term endeavour as a reaction to the shifting policies of Minsk, rather than a consistent and coherent EU strategy towards Belarus.

This opinion notes that the misperception of EU foreign policy lies not within the dilemma of using the wrong sticks or carrots,³ but within the general misunderstanding of what the game offers, who the players are and what rules of the game frame the decisions made by the other side.

There are a number of explanations for disconnect in the EU – Belarus's relations and the assumed inefficiency of EU eastern neighbourhood policy towards Belarus; however, a lot of arguments refer to geopolitical implications. On the one hand, the so-called geopolitical chessboard provides an uncomplicated explanation

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¹ Wilson, A., *A New Paradigm or the Same Old Balancing Act?*, <http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_wilson_on_belarus>; Fischer, S. (ed.), *Back from the Cold? The EU and Belarus in 2009*, <<http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp119.pdf>>; Vytis, J. & Narkeviciute, J., *The EU-Belarus Dialogue: Opportunity or Simulacrum?*, <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-04-17-narkeviciute-en.html>>.

² *Belarus Reality Check 2012*, <http://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id515/Belarus_Reality_Check_December_2012.pdf>.

³ Lucas, E., *Wrong Carrot, Wrong Stick*, <<http://www.cepa.org/content/wrong-carrot-wrong-stick>>.

for the shortcomings and failures of EU policy, downgrading it to the influence of the third actor; on the other hand, it oversimplifies the complexity of issues and ends up in a deadlock of how to outplay Russia. The geopolitical chessboard evokes a parallel of disconnect between the players, where one side tries to play chess while the other enjoys checkers.

The Council of the European Union describes its policy towards Belarus as “the policy of critical engagement [...] and recalls that the development of bilateral relations under the Eastern Partnership is conditional on progress towards respect by Belarus for the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights”.⁴ This document, among many others, and notably the “critical engagement”, reveals the confusion of in the EU policy.

First of all, there’s a question of the agency. Namely, who are the players of the game? Some authors claim that Belarus is trading off its sovereignty;⁵ therefore, the supporters of geopolitical thinking would exclude Belarus as an independent player. Consequently, they claim that, if the EU wants to solve the deadlock with Belarus, it should address the big elephant in the room – Russia. Finally, one might consider asking if Belarus is playing, or is even present at the table at all, as official Minsk has been ignorant to communicate with Brussels.

The other issue of paramount importance addressing the question of agency is what the pieces on the chessboard are. In contrast to the critics of the international democracy promotion work, the EU is addressing a variety of target groups: – civil society, human rights defenders and, local authorities, as well as the national government. This “multifaceted assortment of endeavours, engaged in by a diverse plurality of actors of different sorts”⁶ definitely looks like a chessboard game. Meanwhile the other side of the game (if it’s not an imaginary friend) is using checkers – white and black pieces – either you are in line with the regime or you are considered to be in opposition.

Secondly, there’s a question of process and operational capacity to be able to react quickly to the move made by the other player. Obviously, playing chess encompasses a complexity of moves of different pieces, which often results in the inaccuracy brilliantly pin-pointed by Edward Lucas of “using a hammer when you

⁴ *Council Conclusions on Belarus*, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132836.pdf>.

⁵ Marin, A., *Trading off sovereignty. The outcome of Belarus’s integration with Russia in the security and defence field*, <<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belaruss-integration-russia>>.

⁶ Burnell, P., *Does International Democracy Promotion Work?*, 2007, Bonn.

need a spanner”.⁷ Similarly, in the EU the decision-making process is complicated due to the range of bureaucratic mechanisms in Brussels and the national capitals. Playing checkers is much easier – there are standard moves, obvious targets and everything is either black or white. Therefore, the policy of Minsk is always one step ahead, leaving Brussels only in reactive mode.

And, most importantly, there’s the fundamental question of the objective of the game. In other words, what is the overall goal of the game, and what motivates the players? Kristi Raik, for instance, stated that the Eastern Partnership is talking democracy and thinking geopolitics.⁸ The supporters of conspiracy theories would usually accuse any efforts at promoting democracy to be an attempt at regime change and would argue that this is the reason for the absence of the other player.

Such an approach would argue that external actors should not and cannot promote democracy justifying this by terms of non-intervention or state sovereignty. These are valid arguments, but whatever the EU’s policies are, they usually address the local actors. As Michael Walzer rightly noted that “struggles for democratization, whatever help they receive from outsiders, are always local struggles”.⁹ Even so, you would hear that none of the pieces – be it they in political opposition (A. Lebedko, A. Milinkevich, V. Neklyayev, A. Sannikov) or civic actors – do not represent the society. Obviously, none of them can do that in an oppressive and non-democratic environment. Moreover, history has a number of examples of when dissidents have become presidents (Vaclav Havel or Nelson Mandela, to name two).

The European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus, which is the latest initiative from Brussels, indicates the objective. Though a process is not very comprehensible yet, it seems that the agent of this game is to be considered civil society. Nobody is swiping the chess board, but the message is clear – Brussels needs a diversity of interactions to play chess, and that’s what official Minsk cannot deliver.

This surely means that the above-mentioned critical engagement will be a long-term project, streamlining the dual-track approach. Therefore, critics of sanctions

⁷ Lucas, E., *Screwed Hammers, Nails and Eastern Partnership*, <<http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/screwed-hammers-nails-and-eastern-partnership>>.

⁸ Raik, K., “Talking Democracy, Thinking Geopolitics: The EU’s Eastern Partnership Policy Faces Difficult Choices”, *FIIA Comment*, November 2011.

⁹ Walzer, M., “On Promoting Democracy”, *Ethic & International Affairs*, 22(4), 2008, <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/journal/22_4/essays/001.html>.

should be silenced: despite the so-called restrictive measures, the trade with the EU countries has recently been substantially increasing¹⁰.

Therefore, a complicated and long-term strategy, similar to the game of chess, avoids the trap of black-and-white accusations promoting either sanctions or engagement. “Responsible engagement support enhanced economic integration while at the same time seeking to mitigate some of the negative human rights impacts of this integration, in the worst cases, prescribes a series of ‘smart sanctions’ directed at recalcitrant, human rights abusing elites”,¹¹ which would be the formula for escaping the current pat in Belarus.

¹⁰ European Union, *Trade in Goods With Belarus*, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113351.pdf>.

¹¹ Forcese, C., *Engagement in an Era of Economic Integration*, <http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/LawJournals/Craig_Forcese_YHRDLJ.pdf>.