

Eastern Partnership and Belarusian Civil Society

The fact that Belarus joined the EU Eastern Partnership is a major event that gives a new momentum to the recent dynamics in Belarus-EU relations. The new format of these relations has reanimated the however narrowed public debate in Belarus and raised some hopes about possible changes introduced through the process of gradual rapprochement with the EU.

The country itself has long been at the margin of European processes due to (self)isolation. Therefore, EU's offer to include Belarus into the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was met with enthusiasm, especially by most of the country's third sector that had been advocating an agenda of Europeanization over the last decade. The expectation is that the new external environment, which emerged after new tensions between Belarus and Russia in 2006-2007 and 2008 (Russia-Georgia war), will help to break the deadlock of national politics and lead to greater civil society influence over the processes taking place in Belarus. At the same time, the Eastern Partnership was interpreted by the majority of the society as a new opportunity and a historical chance for Belarus – which, however, does not guarantee change.

Closer to Europe – a mere facade or a real strategy?

Over the last year and a half, there have also been some changes in the official discourse – words such as liberalization, human rights and democratic development have come to be widely used by Belarusian state officials. They have also been putting an emphasis on the necessity of a pragmatic readjustment of the relations with the EU. For example, in June 2009, the topic of the 'Common Information Day' – a monthly event, one of the main activities run by ideological departments and directed at state institutions and enterprises - was entitled "The Belarus-Europe Dialog: current issues". Its main message can be expressed with a quotation¹: "The EU possesses the most advanced technologies, mighty investment possibilities and huge intellectual potential. This is exactly what is needed to help the economic modernization of Belarus". The authorities, have ventured an attempt to show the EU their willingness to start an internal dialogue. This endeavour included initiating a number of consultative councils and inviting some civil society representatives to join them.

This '*relance*' of European integration issues in Belarus has brought about some changes in the public mood. Although Belarus is still a deeply divided country, recent polls show however a rise

¹ В ЕС – новейшие технологии, мощные инвестиционные возможности и колоссальный интеллектуальный потенциал. То есть все, что необходимо для содействия **экономической модернизации Беларуси.**

in supporters of European integration. For the first time over the past several years, the number of those preferring the European option has slightly surpassed the number of those, who would like to see Belarus in closer union with Russia. Analysts predict a further rise in this tendency, partly thanks to a change in the official rhetoric. Most of human rights defenders also admit lower intensity of political harassment in comparison with the years 2006-2008.

Civil society – the engine of change.

An important number of political and civil society actors have tried to build the momentum by pushing forward the European integration agenda. In May 2009, Alaksandar Milinkevich, the leader of the movement For Freedom and the most known Belarusian opposition politician, decided to convene the Belarusian European Forum aiming at supporting Belarus' turn towards the European Union, making the processes of Belarus' Europeanization irreversible and mobilizing the potential and the supporters of the Belarusian pro-European forces. During the three months prior to the Forum, in 97 cities and towns across Belarus, meetings and round tables had been organised to nominate delegates to the Forum. The regional meetings have also included discussions on the advantages of the European choice for Belarus, presentations of what can be achieved from the participation in EU programs and how the key target groups of the Belarusian society would benefit from the cooperation and integration with the united Europe. The Forum, held in November, became a major political and civic event of 2009 in Belarus. Attended by some 1000 persons, including several MEPs, it allowed to reaffirm the pro-European stance of most of the Belarusian civil society actors, adopt a common strategy for further work to raise awareness about the advantages of the European integration among all social groups, involve the public sector into the dialogue with the EU and to strengthen the civil society cooperation capacity with European partners. If fully implemented, this action plan has the potential to bring about profound changes in the country.

Another powerful example of the Belarusian civil society mobilization to the EaP challenges has been the preparation and participation of its representatives in the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF). The Belarusian NGOs have proved to be highly organized and able to develop very relevant common proposals in order to institutionalize the CSF and provide the non-state actors with important tools to monitor and participate in the interaction between the EU and partner countries. The expertise and preparedness of the Belarusian delegation was a key factor in nominating Siargiej Mackievic, Chair of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs in Belarus, as the spokesperson of the CSF while dealing with the European Commission and the EU Council of Ministers. Activities that followed the first CSF in Brussels may lead to establishing a NGOs coordinating centre both nationally, among Belarusian actors and, regionally, among EaP

partner countries, thus providing greater profile of the civil society in the EaP and a number of tools to develop common a national and eventually a regional EaP civil society agenda and to monitor the relations and projects run at the intergovernmental level.

The Eastern Partnership – the effect on non-governmental organizations.

However, by the end of 2009 the initial enthusiasm has somehow faded – mainly due to lack of substantial progress in extending the civil society’s space and scope in Belarus. The legal framework for the third sector in Belarus has hardly changed, let alone the still in-force but rarely implemented Article 193-1 which criminalizes the activities on behalf of non-registered organizations. Other very restrictive measures have not been removed either: complicated NGO registration procedures and regular denials of it, highly prohibitive rental costs, and the need to obtain official registration of international projects and, subsequently, paying taxes for them. The much advertised by the authorities consultative councils engaging the civil society representatives, proved to be mere façade initiatives without any real decision-making powers and, what is even more, implementation mechanisms.

There is a number of risks that the Belarusian civil society actors see in the EaP. The main one has to do with concerns of “the government comes first” approach. Voices are raised that the EU opening to Belarus and its softer line might mostly serve the preservation and legitimisation of the authoritarian system in Belarus, whereas the authorities, by strengthening the GONGOs (Government-operated Non-governmental Organizations), would seek to replace independent NGOs in EU-funded projects, thus marginalising them even more.

In this respect, it is very important to continue regular involvement and consultations of civil society actors on issues of EU-Belarus relations. Since the basic features of the political regime in Belarus have remained intact, striking a right balance between government and NGOs oriented projects is still a necessary approach, keeping some de-coupling of the agendas especially in such matters as media freedom, human rights protection and pro-European activities. At the same time, the civil society actors should be encouraged to go beyond confrontational logic and come out with more realistic and positive proposals commensurate with their capacities and resources as well as larger society needs. Such proposals would only win if they seek to involve, whenever possible, regional and local authorities, business actors and other non-state actors.

Further capacity building and expertise development of the civil society, allowing its representative to be useful intermediaries between the public institutions and EU partners in all

EaP platforms and initiatives, should be one of the priorities. There are already a number of positive examples provided by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, the Office for a Democratic Belarus and the EuroBelarus Consortium. The developed knowledge and participation in European epistemic communities' networks can be significant assets in placing the civil society actors as legitimate interlocutors of relations between EU and state actors. Such common dealing with the EU and introduction of its standards and norms will lay firmer foundations for a genuine domestic dialogue both on national and local levels.

Thus, the Eastern Partnership has raised expectations and served as a catalyst for the Belarusian civil society mobilisation and intensification of pro-European activities in Belarus but tangible results are still to come.

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