



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH  
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

# COMMENTARIES AND OPINIONS

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## **Belarus Slowly Losing its Independence**

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With the European Union ambassadors being recalled from Minsk last week, bilateral relations are getting dangerously close to being critical. This could result in the complete loss of the EU's influence in Belarus and the beginning of a new EU policy towards the country.

The EU Council has had problems with the introduction of new sanctions on Belarus, which clearly showed that Belarus has done its homework well and has learned how to run diplomacy according to the Russian handbook. In other words: act slowly but do not forget about your goals, do not act globally but rather choose local actions, assume that the EU is not running a single foreign policy, and always find the weak spots such as countries which are more interested in their own business than solidarity.

#### Recalled for consultations

On February 28th 2012, Belarus reacted strongly to the increase in EU sanctions: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus published a statement that said due to the position of the EU, the Belarusian Ambassadors in Brussels and Warsaw had been recalled to Minsk for consultation. At the same time, the EU and Polish Ambassadors in Minsk were asked to deliver the position of the Belarusian government personally to their capitals for consultation, meaning to leave the country.

In diplomatic language, the suggestion that the diplomats were sent home for consultations is not tantamount to expelling them from Belarus or recognizing them as *persona non grata*. It also has little to do with the breaking of the diplomatic relations. In fact, the specific wording of the Belarusian statement has actually left the door open for the ambassadors' return.

However, these kinds of situations do not happen often in diplomacy, and do not bode well for the future. They can be interpreted as the failure of bilateral relations and contemporary policy, but when it comes to Belarus, this is not the first time it has happened. In 1998, EU ambassadors left Minsk for “consultation” after the government began noisy renovations in the diplomatic district designed to force diplomats to move out of the Drozdy district.

Poland and Belarus have a history of recalling their ambassadors for consultation, and two cases in particular come to mind: Tadeusz Pawlak in 2005 and Henryk Litwin in 2010. However, such steps make it possible for both sides to cool down and to rethink their policy, while giving way for a restart in the diplomatic game.

For the last twenty years, relations between Belarus and the West have been held in a closed (one could even say “magic”) circle: from growing tensions through crises, then relaxation, and finally a re-cooling of relations. For the last two decades, Belarus has used its excellent location between East and West very wisely. The EU's openness to dialogue and willingness to support the people of Belarus are perceived by Minsk to be a lack of consistency and a general weakness. Another problem is the virtual lack of a serious offer from Brussels to a country that does not manifest a desire for integration or association with EU structures, while it has a very deep and long-term integration with Russia.

The media picked up on the topic and soon the suggestion that the situation between Belarus and western countries was almost on the brink of war appeared in the headlines: (“Belarus kicks out Polish and EU Ambassadors”, “Polish and EU Ambassadors expelled from Minsk” – being only some examples).

On the evening of February 28th 2012, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy issued a statement announcing that ambassadors of other EU countries serving in Minsk must also leave Minsk for consultations in their capitals as a sign of solidarity with Poland.

This gesture of solidarity is a diplomatic precedence in EU foreign policy. However, it could be seen as a necessary reaction to avoid discussion on the position of several EU members interested in breaking the common European policy towards Belarus. This included Slovenia which tried to secure its business investments in Belarus. (Through striving to secure its own business interests, Ljubljana managed to ensure that Yuri Chyzh, the "Treasurer of Lukashenko," was not included in the list of people supporting the regime and therefore being present on the EU blacklist). The image of a common foreign policy towards Belarus appeared to crack. Catherine Ashton and Radosław Sikorski had to find an answer to the question on how to mask this lack of unity? The solution turned out to be a solidarity call for ambassadors to return to their capitals for consultations.

Unfortunately, the media and politicians on both sides have probably gone too far and there is no indication that the situation will improve in short run. The steps taken by the West will only be effective under the condition that they are a first step towards concrete action which would show that the EU has taken the initiative in leaving behind any illusions of Minsk. Otherwise, the ambassadors will return to their posts after a few months and we will again witness the return flexing of diplomatic muscles.

However, despite many objections it appears that a quick return to the full functioning of diplomatic missions is important. It can be assumed that in the case of Belarus, where regular contacts between Minsk and the other capitals are limited, the work of embassies is crucial for providing communication with the Belarusian nomenclature. Unfortunately, the return of ambassadors to Minsk will not solve the problem of the ineffectiveness of European policy.

#### Realistic and pragmatic course

The withdrawal of ambassadors and having an incomplete staff in the embassies may lead to dangerous assessments and recapitulations in European politics in the long-term. The EU may be willing to choose a realistic and pragmatic course which will create space for deliberations about the independence or sovereignty of Belarus. If this happens, we can assume that a new policy towards Minsk will be formed on the following assessments:

- a) In order to protect its interests, the EU does not need ambassadors to be present in its embassies in Belarus.
- b) Member countries of the EU can afford to take a tough a stance towards Minsk and lower the rank of diplomatic missions, as the EU is indifferent to the dynamics of the development of economic relations. Political relations will be shaped with regard to Russia's position as a party which has an impact on political developments in Belarus.

c) The level of integration of Belarus and Russia through such integration structures as the Union of Belarus and Russia, the single economic area, a free trade area and customs union, have moved the major centre of economic decision to Moscow. Therefore Minsk, as the weakest (economically and demographically) partner, only formally retains the attributes of sovereignty: the office of president, parliament, army, flag, anthem, and passports, etc.

d) The EU agrees with the fact that Belarus may temporarily lose its formal independence. Democratic changes are impossible in this country without profound political and democratic changes in Russia.

e) For ordinary Belarusians, it is easier to find employment in Russia without hassle, than to work legally in the EU. Moreover, the EU does not intend to simplify procedures for issuing visas to the Schengen area and reduce the cost of obtaining them.

The risky new EU policy towards Minsk defined on the basis of the above hypothetical assessment of the situation may take the following form:

1. The presence of embassy staff is reduced. The EU maintains an embassy in a residual form (without an ambassador). Keeping full ambassadors is of course prestigious, but Brussels is not willing to maintain a presence in Belarus at any cost. Maintaining embassies in such a form allows for the rapid restoration of the full structure and return to diplomatic dialogue when needed and possible. At the same time, the EU member states should follow the Belarusian example and ask the Belarusian heads of missions to the EU to leave for consultations in order to personally and officially deliver the position of the EU member states to Minsk (as has happened to the EU ambassadors).

2. The EU will reorganize its consular presence. While the Schengen visa system has harmonized the methods of issuing visas, the EU may try to test the concept of issuing visas through the EU External Action Service. The EU will set a general consulate in Minsk, and in each oblast.

3. The EU Member states will enhance the economic departments of their embassies. Strengthening the middle class and an economic presence in Belarus lies at the economic interest of all countries of the EU, while the government of Belarus has declared its openness to investments and the desire to attract western capital.

4. The EU member states may establish special Belarusian desks in their embassies in Russia.

5. Support for civil society in Belarus will be continued and no major changes are anticipated. The financing of civil society and NGOs is in violation of Belarusian law, and EU countries still do not have the tools to protect their partners.

6. The EU remains ready to support Belarusian society in case of rapid changes in Belarus, enforced by the massive demonstrations in support for democratic change: as was the case with Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

## Leading to Nowhere

Although the above mentioned framework sounds fantastic, we all should be aware of the fact that Belarus is losing its independence. The Belarusian side should also understand that putting its own independence in the game and blackmailing the EU is dangerous. The idea that the EU should keep working with Belarus because otherwise it pushes the country into the arms of Russia, leads nowhere. There are many shades of grey, and the above fictional course of Brussels indicates that the EU does have a choice.

Belarus's loss of sovereignty will not happen suddenly. We are witnessing it as a long-term process and it seems that this process is reversible. However, this process is developing slowly and gradually, and this phenomenon makes EU consciousness fall asleep. The Belarusian opposition is divided and the EU has started to understand that very little can be done with it. The new coalitions of democratic opposition do not represent either the entire political spectrum of Belarusian society or the voice of socially active citizens. Civil society in Belarus does not exist: we can only see it in its early stages. However, a situation may also develop in which Belarus won't be a formally independent country.

The West can continue to invest in Belarus, to take care of their interests and build a good relationship, but Alexander Lukashenko and his entourage must realize that without major structural reforms in Belarus, this country is becoming economically less attractive. Western investment in Belarus is calculated on a long-term basis, possibly surviving beyond the rule of Alexander Lukashenko. Business cares very little if its investments develop within the framework of the Republic of Belarus, or Belarus as a part of Russian Federation. Both cases are acceptable for business.

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