

Belarus and the European Union **From confrontation to the dialogue**

Larissa Titarenko

ABSTRACT

Republic of Belarus as an independent state appeared on the map of Europe only in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Currently, Belarus is a middle-size country on the borderland between the European Union and Russia. Although politically Belarus is independent, it takes part in the political and economic unions within the post-soviet region, such as Eurasian Economic Union. Belarus is also in the bilateral union with Russia. Therefore its foreign policy depends on these Unions. From 1994 when the country turned from the Parliamentary to the Presidential Republic, an authoritarian political regime of Alexander Lukashenko has been established: conservative in domestic issues and politically oriented to Russia. This political factor influences Belarusian foreign policy. Belarus participated in the Wider Europe and Eastern Neighborhood Program, being an outsider in both programs because until recently both sides, Belarus and the European Union, prioritized their own interests and did not make any political compromises. Under the influence of recent political and economic changes in the region (protracted economic crises, escalation of Russian-Ukrainian conflict after 2014 Maidan revolution, long-lasting Western anti-Belarus political and economic sanctions) Belarus has started a new wave of post-soviet transition. Still being nationalistic and paternalistic, the country is becoming more open to the West and making steps forward the European Union. For this reason, in 2015 most of the Western political and economic sanctions were suspended, and the relationship between the European Union and Belarus got improved. It is still unclear what will be the next steps in the EU-Belarus affairs. However, geopolitical position of Belarus as a borderland between the East and the West makes it necessary to promote multilateral policy and develop political, economic and cultural dialogue with the European Union.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, European Union, foreign policy, bilateral relations, economy, sanctions, dialogue.

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I. INTRODUCTION. POSSIBILITIES AND ALTERNATIVES

Republic of Belarus is an essential part of the European political mosaic, therefore it is impossible to ignore this country regardless of its relatively small role in the European politics and the global affairs, as well as its contribution to the European economic development. It is important to mention that being politically closer to Russia than any other ex-Soviet republics, geographically Belarus is situated in the center of Europe and from this criteria it is closer to the West. The nearest neighbour country from the Belarusian border to Minsk, a capital of Belarus, is Lithuania, - only 112 km, while the distance from Minsk to the Russian border is 278 km, and to the Ukrainian border - 305 km.

Republic of Belarus has a middle size territory in the European perspective (207,5 sq. km): its territory is equal to three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) taken together, or two thirds of the territory of Poland, or one third of the Ukraine. Currently Belarusian population is 9.5 million (it is also more than three Baltic states taken together, but much less that the population of Poland or Ukraine). The density of the population in Belarus is 45 persons per sq. km.



Map of Belarus

Republic of Belarus was declared as a new independent state in 1991, as well as did other ex-Soviet states. Since then, there are many media stereotypes on Belarus in the countries of the European Union, including its neighbors Poland, Lithuania and Latvia where the population is not aware of the actual situation in Belarus. Some people are afraid of Belarus as a potentially dangerous country, and some others believe that Belarus still resembles the Soviet Union. Neither image is correct as Belarus is one of the safest country in Europe and differs from the Soviet past in many aspects. In order to have more realistic image of Belarus, citizens of the EU need some enlightenment on this country.

The origin of the Republic of Belarus is connected with the collapse of the Soviet Union that was formally dissolved in December 1991. This destructive phenomenon had launched a new stage in the history of Belarus. However, it is

still unclear for the scholars of Eastern Europe whether the period of the post-Soviet transformation in the eastern parts of the former Soviet empire is over or not. Politically and economically, post-Soviet Eastern Europe (it contains Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) is still in transition. These three ex-Soviet independent republics are in search for their strong national identity, and each of these newly independent states is still trying to build a sustainable economy and stable political relations with their neighbors and the larger world. Each of them goes its own way: Ukraine dreams to join the European Union, Moldova is balancing between Russia and the European Union, and Belarus wants to strengthen its independence without entering the new unions and associations.

For this striving for the national transition to political and economic independence, Belarus is not an exception. Although there were no Belarusian revolutionary changes like in Ukraine, and no fast political shifts from western orientation to Russia and vice versa like in Moldova, Republic of Belarus is not protected from any similar events in the future. Although its role in the all-European political game looks not important from the outside, the country cannot be ignored. The most important current problem for the Republic of Belarus, situated between the two major players, European Union and Russia, is the political and economic pressure from both sides. This is typical for a borderland country like Belarus. On the one hand, the eastern “Big Brother” Russia is trying to strengthen its own greatness in the ex-Soviet region and the world, while western sanctions and fall of the world oil prices have posed serious challenges to the Russian desire of becoming a second world power equal to the US and to break the uni-polar world. After Maidan revolution in Ukraine, Russia tries to keep the rest of its neighboring countries under its dominance, and Belarus is one of such countries. On the other hand, the European Union also experiences a difficult period, mainly because of the migration crisis, British decision to leave the EU (Brexit), and rejection of several Central European countries, members of the EU, to accept new migrants and provide shelter for them. Under these circumstances the strengthening of the borders of the EU, including the border between the EU and Belarus, has become a serious security issue. Making this border strong may help to protect the EU from many unwanted migrants from the East (Belarus is not a donor state in this migration process: it plays a role of a transition corridor for those foreigners who arrived to Russia, illegally moved to Belarus for a short while with a hope to cross the EU Belarusian border and then ask for migration status in the EU. The migrant rate in Belarus is less than 1 migrant per 1000 Belarusian population).

These circumstances created a new challenge for the EU and opened a possibility to construct the new relationship with the Republic of Belarus – more equal than it was earlier when the EU tried to dictate its own rules to Belarus. Now the EU started to treat Belarus friendlier that it was in the previous decades.

However, the new conditions only gave a chance for real improvement of the relationship between Belarus and the EU: nobody can guarantee whether this chance will be realized in the practical sphere, or a new political reserve will follow soon.

In what follows several issues will be discussed. First, a brief overview of the historical past of Belarus will explain some current contradictions and peculiarities in Belarusian-Russian and Belarusian-EU relationship. Second, contemporary political and economic situation of the Republic of Belarus will be described. Then several contradictions, including internal and external, will be presented, as well as some latest developments between the EU and Belarus in the security issues. Finally, some thoughts about the future possibilities will be disclosed in the paper.

II. BRIEF HISTORY AND THE POST-SOVIET SITUATION

Currently, the Republic of Belarus is a borderland between Russia and Poland from the East to the West, and between the current Lithuania and Latvia and Ukraine from the North to the South. In other words, the country, Belarus, is a new border between the “two Europes” – the united members of the European Union and the non-EU region (Korosteleva 2017), where Ukraine recently has become an associated country with the EU. From the opposite approach, supported by different authors (Russian, some Western and some Belarusian – belonging to the opposition), contemporary Minsk belongs to the East and somehow opposes the idea of “Europe”. To some extent, for purely political reasons, using the well-known theory of Huntington (Huntington 1996), these authors depict almost “a clash of civilizations” situation that takes place exactly on the border between contemporary Belarus and Poland (Proleskovskiy 2011). However, this contemporary view on Belarus and Minsk is politically biased: it does not reflect long and contradictory history of Belarusian lands and even the history of the Republic of Belarus.

The truth is that Belarusian lands have been always a borderland, however, from the different sides. Thus, the hidden “border nature” of Belarus was masked by several myths especially constructed and ideologically supported during the last two centuries. This nature must be open for the public from both East and West.

The previous history of Belarus

During almost six centuries, Belarusian lands were a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and then a part of Poland (there was a feudal union between Poland and GDL where Poland dominated); they played a role of the “Eastern bor-

der” in these states. That is why during the feudal wars between GDL/ Poland and Muscovy in the 16-17 cc. the borderland Belarusian cities were often captured and ruined by the Russian troops. During these centuries Belarusian lands belonged to the Central-European region and shared its cultural identities. This borderland position is still similar: Republic of Belarus is situated in the geographical center of Europe, and it is a cultural borderland.

For above-mentioned six centuries from the medieval time till the end of the 20th c. Belarusian lands were a part of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then Poland, then Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union (*History of Belarus* 2000). Western/Central European cultural trends prevailed here until the beginning of the 19th c., then being substituted by Russian cultural influence. Later in the 20th c., after the October revolution of 1917, the Soviet/Marxist ideology and culture prevailed. Belarus as a Soviet republic was totally subordinated to Moscow, and its population was treated by the Soviet power in the same way as other Soviet republics.

Let us describe the ethnic composition and cultural peculiarities of Belarusians. During the centuries the territory of current Belarus was populated by several ethnic groups, with different religious and cultural identities. Many of these groups (for example, Tartars or Jews) spoke their own languages; however, there were no clashes between these groups on the basis of cultural or ethnic differences: in case of intergroup conflicts they always were inspired by the ruling powers that followed the principle “Divide and conquer”. It is this principle of Tsarist Russia that organized Jewish pogroms in Belarus in the beginning of the 20th century, as well as prohibited Catholic churches after the revolt in the 1860s. As for the common people, they peacefully lived together (or close to each other in one settlement) without bloody conflicts, regardless of differences in their genes, religion, or cultural traditions. They communicated in their everyday life, and for communication needs they have to learn languages of each other or at least use some languages for mutual understanding (like in the 19th c. people used Russian in the cities not being ethnic Russians, but for practical needs because this language was dominant in the official sphere of life).

Soviet past of Belarus

Belarusian socialist soviet state was constructed firstly in January 1, 1919. It is hardly possible to call it “independent” as this state was formed in the fierce post-revolutionary atmosphere of class struggle: actually, the first Belarusian state was formed in March 1918 under the German occupation, but then, after Germans were gone in late 1918, Bolsheviki founded a new Belarusian state and considered it first; however, this state soon (in December 1922) became a part of the Soviet Union and therefore lost even a chance to be independent).

There are many historical interpretations of the Soviet period of Belarus (Orlov and Saganovich 2001; Zaprudnik 1993) with rather negative description of the

consequences of the Soviet power for Belarusians. However, such views are one-sided. If we shed light on the industrial development of Belarus, it will be clear that only in the Soviet period of Belarusian history the big plants and factories were built and the process of industrialization took place successfully, so that by the end of the Soviet history Belarus was industrial country (in the Tsarist time it was totally agricultural province). The same is with education: before 1917 most people were illiterate. During the Soviet period secondary education has become obligatory, so that majority of children graduated from seven (later eight, and finally ten years) secondary school (in the US it is called high school). The first university was opened in Minsk in 1924, and many other institutions of higher education – just before and after the Second World War. By the end of the Soviet period there were 32 institutions of higher education; Belarus had its own engineers, doctors, lawyers, military officers, etc. educated in the republic. Population was literate, medical treatment was free. Citizens had equal rights, according to the Soviet Constitution, so that all ethnicities, gender were equal according to the law. Still, there was political dictatorship of the communist party and political restrictions. However, as during the 1950-80s a period of Cold War between the two political systems was in function, these restrictions were officially justified by this factor of the global counterpart of the two world systems.

Overall, Soviet legacy is contradictory: there were positive and negative consequences for Belarus from this period. Thus, from the point of view of multiculturalism, one must agree that the Soviet rule contributed into this process. This contribution can be described as both positive and negative: for the “masses” its influence was positive, while for so called “non-working, alien social elements” it was negative (i.e. exclusive). Official Soviet ideology and the first Soviet Constitution made people of all nations and ethnicities equal as citizens of the USSR (with the exclusion of those without these rights). Therefore, Belarusian population *en masse* was treated by the Soviet power in the same way as all the people in other Soviet republics. It means there were no privileges as well as no special ethnic pressure to Belarusians (Russification was not applied only to Belarusians, therefore, it is not a “special” method): in the 1930s Belarus experienced starvation, in the 1940s Belarusians actively participated in the war against Nazi’s occupation; in the 1930-1950s they were repressed by Stalin’s regime, and in the late 1980s they suffered from the Chernobyl catastrophe under Gorbachev. However, the people of Belarus inherited multiculturalism from their long previous experience of living together in the same territory (*History of Belarus* 2000).

Actually, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (it was the official title of the country during the Soviet time, according to the Soviet spelling) became a model for other soviet republics to demonstrate how different nations and ethnic groups can live and work together. Therefore, regardless of the Soviet regime, the country, the Soviet Byelorussia, was an attractive place of living for many soviet people from other regions. The population of the Soviet Byelorussia grew due to

this factor (internal migration within the Soviet state), therefore it differed in ethnic origin, cultural traditions, and even in religion.

There were more than hundred different ethnic groups and minorities living in this republic (<http://belstat.gov.by>). The majority of population consisted of ethnic Belarusians; Russian went second, then Ukrainians and Poles come. It is interesting to mention that during the Tsarist Russian time Belarus was a pale: Belarusian cities were mainly Jewish-populated, while nobilities were Russians. Native Belarusians lived in the villages and were illiterate. Even the so called native Belarusian elites in the 19th c. were not of Belarusian, but of Polish origin (for this reason there are still discussions whether Tadeusz Kościuszko, an American hero during the American war for the independence, was Pole or Belarusian by ethnicity; as he was born on the territory of contemporary Belarus; the same is with many Belarusian poets and writers whose origin is questionable). In the Soviet period the cities became more populated by Russians, while Jewish and Belarusian population also resided. Because hundreds of thousand Jews were killed by Nazi in 1941-1944 (1944 – a year of Belarusian liberation by the Soviet Army from the Nazi German occupation), percentage of the Jewish population fell down significantly; and its number became much smaller again after the massive Jewish emigration from Belarus to the USA and Israel in the 1970s. Currently, 8 out of 10 citizens of the country (83% in 2016) are ethnic Belarusians, around 8% are ethnic Russians, Poles – more than 3%, Ukrainians – around 2%, and the other ethnic groups are small but numerous (<http://belstat.gov.by>). Overall, Belarus is a country with mainly Slavic population.

Multicultural nature of Belarus

Belarus is a multi-religious country from the feudal time. First, Orthodox Church came here in the 13 cc. Later, due to Polish influence, Roman-Catholic religion became popular, and all Belarusian nobilities converted into Catholicism. From the end of the 18th c., when Belarusian lands were under Tsarist Russian rule, Orthodox Church dominated. The Soviet power declared religion “an opium for the people” and closed most churches. Still, some churches were opened and functioned even under the Soviet regime (there always existed different churches in the territory of Belarus – Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant; although the Soviet power contributed a lot in their destruction, especially in big cities), so that people could practice their religious rituals. In the Soviet days religion was separated from the state, but still existed on a private level: only the so called destructive sects were prohibited. It does not mean that the Soviet regime was neutral to religiosity; however, if someone was not a career-oriented person and did not pretend to a relatively high place in the social hierarchy, he or she could attend the church without a fear. Other people preferred to pray at home and did not express their religious beliefs openly. Rural dwellers could go to the church only if there was one in their

locality). People were neutral to religiosity of each other in private life, although in the public they seemed to be atheists. They married regardless of ethnic/ religious background of each other.

Post-Soviet development

After the Soviet collapse in 1991 religious growth has tremendously increased: in less than 10 years almost half of the population in Belarus has identified themselves as believers, and many religious denominations have appeared (Novikova, 2001). The process of religious Renaissance continued almost for two decades, it gave rise to the Christian churches - first of all, Russian Orthodoxy under the name of Belarusian Orthodox Church (according to surveys, around 50% of the population identify themselves as Orthodox), then the Roman-Catholic Church that was also recognized as a “historical legacy” of Belarus (less than 10% of the population), then such Christian denominations as Uniate church, Old Believers, and several Protestant denominations: Lutheran, Evangelical Christian, etc. – as well as non-Christian religions, among them Muslims, Krishnaites, Baha’i, etc. The rest of the population belongs to non-believers or so called unidentified group. Currently, religious pluralism and freedom of consciousness are protected by the Constitution. These rights – now being confirmed in a Law on religion (*Law*, 2002) – are in total contrast to the previous (Soviet) necessity for persons to be (or at least to declare themselves) atheists, however, it is in line with the European regional context and the fundamental human rights.

Currently, Belarus is under a double foreign influence in the religious sphere. As a part of the two-state Union with Russia, Belarus experiences the Russian influence on the structure of religious confessions in Belarus, level and scale of religiosity of its population (relationship between the two main Christian denominations, Orthodox and Roman-Catholic, are in favor of the Russian Orthodox Church). As a part of the globe, Republic of Belarus is under the influence of the global factors: different religious and quasi-religious ideas are spreading beyond the borders of nation states and the continents, international exchanges of people and trade are the motors of growing cultural diversity and a driving force of religious multiplicity. Regardless of the political conflicts with the West (the EU and the US sanctions), religious life in Belarus has become a part of the European and global religious field.

The Soviet past contributed into construction of tolerance between the people on all the issues except for official ideology and politics: it was only Marxist and was strongly protected by the power. Other spheres of life – at least from the period after Stalin’s death in mid-1950s – were much less under control. Therefore, by the end of the Soviet era a kind of multiculturalism was built in Belarus. It differed greatly from any other types of multiculturalism.

First, it was limited, mainly, to everyday level of life. The important spheres

(politics, ideology) have never been open to pluralism. Second, it was constructed from above: no officials were interested to ask people what are their needs in pluralism. It was invented to the masses as a consequence of Marxist internationalism (although, it had some historical roots in the local traditions). Third, it was mostly a phenomenon of the socio-cultural sphere and connected to the practical “ideology” of communal everyday life in a village (mainly, pre-revolutionary rural communities) (Kondakov 2007) However, regardless of these limitations, it helped to keep a society in peace and develop it as culturally diverse. All inter-ethnic clashes were punished or restricted as they contradicted the principle of Marxist proletarian internationalism (and therefore principle of multiculturalism as well). Principle of internationalism, as well as prohibition of ethnic and national discrimination, was written in the Soviet Constitution: it was an official Law. Soviet people were socialized under these principles. In terms of Parsons (1951), internationalism and multiculturalism (although the latter was not called by this name in those days) were the universal norms and values of the Soviet society: they helped to integrate Soviet people as a whole (at least it looked like that).

To some extent, multiculturalism of the previous time is a good prerequisite for current openness of the Republic of Belarus to cooperation with different nations, i.e. for openness of Belarus to the East and to the West.

Currently, more than twenty five years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the positive elements of historical legacy of Soviet multiculturalism still exist: middle-age and old-age generations in the ex-Soviet republics know Russian and easily use it as a means of communication in all practical issues (without any political influence); these generations are still proud of their “soviet education” (comprehensive and international in its content); as usual, these people do not blame each other or other nations for political crisis and/or economic problems in their own countries as they distinguish between the government and the people; they can easily co-exist with people from other countries (work together, spend free time together) because of their respect to other national cultures and ethnicities (some kind of tolerance inherited from the Soviet time still exists in their consciousness and their behavior), etc.

Soviet and post-Soviet multiculturalism in Belarus differs from the one in the EU countries: it refers to the diverse but indigenous citizens of a country while in the most EU countries multiculturalism relates to the relationship with migrants. Having in mind this fundamental difference it does not seem relevant to apply any Western theories of multiculturalism to Belarus.

It is not by mistake that famous Polish-British philosopher Zygmunt Bauman called the past Soviet society “the future of Europe” having in mind the European Union and its attempts to build a truly multicultural society within its borders (Bauman 2011, 26). From Bauman view, there is something in the former Soviet history that the European Union must follow – ideology and practice of “living together”. Bauman disagreed with the thesis of some EU politicians about failure of

multiculturalism in Europe; rather, multiculturalism has to be properly developed there in the nearest future.

From this point of view, post-Soviet Republic of Belarus can be considered as an “exceptional island” in the great ocean of bloody ethnic conflicts in the ex-soviet region, (currently – in Ukraine, earlier – in Russia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, etc.). Republic of Belarus is the only one ex-Soviet republics where ethnic conflicts have never taken place after/ during the destruction of the Soviet Union. All the people who lived in the Soviet Belarus became citizens of the Republic of Belarus regardless of their ethnicity, language, political and religious views. No border conflicts took place as well: Belarus is indeed a peaceful place in Europe. In 1997 Belarus was freed from the nuclear weapons and declared itself a nuclear-free state.

As for the social structure of Belarus, most population self-identify themselves as middle class; the proportion of the population living in poverty is relatively small (6-7%). However, comparing with the neighboring EU countries, most of the population do not meet the criteria of belonging to the middle class. In 2015-2016 the standard of living declined 5% and 8% accordingly, and the purchasing power of Belarusian currency declined as well. Age structure of Belarus is typical for the European industrially developed countries: almost 30 % are older than 55, and only 15% are younger than 15. Overall, around 55% belong to the age group of 15-55 (www.belstat.gov.by). Gender structure is also typical: 45% of men and 55% of women. Belarus reached high level of gender equality, and according to the world statistics it reached high level of development (www.hrw.org).

III. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SPECIFICS: AN OVERVIEW

Political development

Political regime of the independent Republic of Belarus has changed twice. Originally it was established in 1991 as a parliamentary republic. This status was kept in 1991-1994. Since 1994 it is a presidential republic with Alexander Lukashenko as its first and only one president. Lukashenko was directly elected in July 1994. In the 1990s he received a strong support from Russia (then under the rule of president Yeltsin). Since 1996 Belarus is in a Union with Russia forming a supranational union of two states. Since the second decade of the twenty first century the ties with ex-Soviet countries increased economically. First, Belarus became a member of the Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan. A few years later the Customs Union has been transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union, as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joint it.

Being totally dependent on Russian energy resources and Russian market, Belarus also follows Russian foreign policy in many aspects. Belarus is a member of

the Collective Security Treaty Organization since the formation of this organization, however, the military expenditures are small (a bit more than 1% of GDP). Belarusian government keeps social security of Belarusian people as its priority; until recently it did not accept any radical economic and political reforms in the social sphere, and only the poor economic situation and the recent need for new loans from the IMF or WB made the government necessary to increase the population spending on the housing and utilities and also raise the retirement age. Unfortunately, these forced economic actions did not allow the government to improve the economic situation: the national economy is still in the critical situation, and the improvement is expected only in the 2020th. Not only the state management, but the economic structure and social policy of the country are in need of some changes if Belarus wants to follow the way of sustainable development and increase the living standards.

Legislative and executive powers in Belarus also need some improvement.

Belarusian parliament consists of two chambers (upper and low), however, president has the right to approve or reject all the laws, additionally, president often issues his own decrees that seem to be implemented by all the branches of power. Practically, his power is not limited by the parliament. Since 2004 the amendments to the Constitution were adopted that allowed the president to stay in office without any limitation. Lukashenko was re-elected in 1994, 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015. All the elections except for the first one were not recognized by the Council of Europe, the US and the European Union as free and fair. These elections were accompanied by political protest demonstrations and disclosed the existing practical restrictions on some political and civil freedoms (freedom of speech and the press, assembly, etc.). Reports on violation of political rights were prepared with the help of the Belarusian opposition and presented in the international organizations.

Democratic restrictions in Belarus led to the fact that the European Union rejected to continue the Agreement on partnership and cooperation in 1997 and did not support the desire of the Republic of Belarus to join the Council of Europe. In the end of the 1990s programs of technical assistance for Belarus have been frozen. Belarus also lost the status of a specially invited member in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Foreign affairs between Belarus, the European Union and the US have deteriorated even more in 1998, after the diplomatic missions were evicted from their residences in Minsk, on the basis of the formally expressed by the Belarusian authorities "safety concerns". European and American diplomats left Minsk, and the official relationships between the EU, US and Belarus dramatically deteriorated. Some Belarusian officials and pro-government businessmen were banned from entering the EU and the US. This conflict lasted for more than a decade and brought enormous damage to Belarusian image in the world, personal image of president Lukashenko, and even more damage to the national economy (Feduta 2005).

The post-soviet transformation formally seems to be completed, while some important economic and political changes still have to be done if Belarus wants to become closer to the West. In order to have the population's support, the authorities keep the basic medical service in Belarus free for all. Education is also free, but those who is ready to pay also has a chance to study at the universities (actually, almost half of students pays the fees). Official unemployment level is around 1 %, while the average salaries are very moderate (in 2017 they were around 400 euro), and those who want to earn more usually move to Russia (manual workers) or other countries (professionals). Economically, Belarus is poorer than Russia, it is especially poor in the natural resources. Per capita income was less than in Russia estimated as \$ 17.500 in 2016. According to the CIA World Factbook, Belarusian GDP was around \$166 billion in 2016 (<https://www.cia.gov>).

Economic development

The economic situation deteriorated since 2011 when the financial crisis started in Belarus, and its economic growth declined. The inflation rates were enormously high, level of salaries dropped more than two times. This situation initiated some protest actions that were partly connected to the political arrests of the opposition leaders that took part during and after the presidential election in 2010. Some of the opposition politicians were imprisoned. In 2014 a new financial crisis erupted, and economic growth rates turned negative.

Market economy in Belarus includes only small and middle-range businesses, while 80% of the economy formally belongs to the state. Economic efficiency is very low; therefore, the state needs money from outside to keep the level of social security in the country. Social security is the main factor to back the social order in Belarus and the power of Lukashenko. Therefore, populist rhetoric always in place. Lukashenko tried to consolidate his power through authoritarian means and a centralized economic system.

The main obstacles in the improvement of Belarusian-EU relationship refer to the political sphere, mainly – according to the official demands from the international organizations – to the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Belarusian authorities were accused of violating the election process, as well as political rights and freedoms of the political unions (opposition parties), rights to gathering, meetings, etc. For more than 20 years none of political opponents of Lukashenko takes a sit in the parliament or government (both on regional and national levels). After the important change in the Constitution in 1996, initiated by president Lukashenko, it became formally possible for him to keep an office for a long time. In the 21st century, due to the new amendments to the Constitution, he can stay in office without any limitation.

Political problems

From the view of the EU officials, Belarus constantly violate the fundamental human rights. This was the reason to impose sanctions against the Lukashenko's authoritarian regime by the European Union in early 2000s. First, the EU imposed travel and financial restrictions for the key Belarusian officials, including President Lukashenko, and state-owned enterprises in 2004 because of the government's flagrant disregard of human rights and democratic governance principles, especially related to the election process. The EU renewed the sanctions annually, gradually applying them to a larger number of the officials, businessmen and companies. On January 31, 2011, following the presidential elections (19.12.2010) that were recognized as not free and not fair, and reacting to the repressions against the opposition leaders after the elections, the EU introduced new sanctions (including ban to enter the EU) against a big group of Belarusian officials related somehow to political repressions and electoral fraud.

Similar assessments were made for the parliamentary election in 2012 (recognized as not free and fair) (*Analytical overview* 2012). At the same time, as it has been researched by independent analytics, opposition forces were not united and could not resist the Lukashenko regime in promoting their candidates and expressing their political interests. As it was mentioned in the report, prepared by the Analytical Belarusian Center (*Analytical overview* 2012), "the democratic forces failed to use the parliamentary elections to strengthen their position in the society... What is more, it also failed to consolidate its regular supporters. With rare exceptions of good examples of interaction of certain opposition organizations, at the parliamentary elections each party has pursued its corporate interests".

This assessment means that political regime in Belarus still had the social support, while the opposition forces were weak and unable to counterpart the current regime. The origins of social support for Belarusian political regime are rooted in the economic and social stability in the country that the population respects very much. At the same time, the support for regime is connected with the people's frustration of growing wild market and the total poverty of the early 1990s, when salaries became miserable, unemployment grew fast, and lack of goods and mismanagement were visible. Most population still remembers the "dashing 1990s" and do not want these economic conditions to return back. President Lukashenko promised to fix the economic situation and stabilize politics when being elected in 1994. He really did it in 1994-6 and for this reason he declared himself "a father of the nation". In 1996 he signed the political agreement with Russia on the Union of two states to back his position in the office, and most of the population also positively assessed this Union. Republic of Belarus immediately started to use the economic benefits of «being a close friend of Russia» (cheap oil and gas, no border control between two states, easy labor migration to Russia, etc.).

This positive economic situation lasted all the years when Russian president

Yeltsin was in office. After Putin took this office in 2000, he began to build the bilateral relationship with the focus on Russian interests and cut the Belarusian benefits. It reflected in the economic agreements within the Customs Union and later the Eurasian Economic Union: Russia has much more preferences than Belarus or other members of these unions. In particular, since 2010 the gas and oil prices were raised for Belarus, so that Belarus lost all the previous economic benefits. On the contrary, current Belarus has a huge debt to Russian corporation GAZPROM because the prices are too high for Belarus to pay them in full. Belarusian national economy is too weak and not reformed. The labor productivity is low; the quality of economic products is low, so that it is difficult to sell them abroad. Belarusian economic “effects” were related to Russian natural resources, and when these resources became not available the Belarusian economic declined. In the last years there were several so called “gas scandals” between Russia and Belarus when they could not negotiate the prices for the next year until the eve of the New Year, and Russian energy supply to Belarus was decreased several time. Since 2016 Russia claimed that Belarus began to accumulating the national debt for paying below the agreed price for Russian gas. By April 2017 this debt reached \$740 million. Russia decided to reduce its export of crude oil to Belarus as a result of this unpaid debt since the end of 2016. In April 2017, when Belarus agreed to pay its gas debt, Russia restored the flow of crude oil. Russia has agreed to refinance external debt of Belarus for the sum of \$700 million (*Gazeta.ru* 2017). In June 2017 during the meeting of presidents of Belarus and Russia in Moscow, Lukashenko stressed that regardless of the above-mentioned scandals the two countries are in close union and their relations are strong.

Usually the “gas conflicts” ended up quickly in favor for Russia. Belarusian population did not suffer for long because of these clashes. However, as Belarusian debt increased dramatically, Belarus needs the new foreign loans to serve the debt. In parallel to gas scandals, after the start of the EU sanctions against Russia, there were “food scandals”. Belarus initiated the trade schemes of sale and resale of food from the EU to Russia replacing the EU food labels by Belarusian labels. Russian authorities founded and exposed these schemes charging Belarus for food substitution. The country did not gain benefits as expected. Therefore a search for foreign loans continued. Notwithstanding the foreign financial assistance, Belarusian economy continues to struggle under the weight of high external debt servicing payments and trade deficit.

President Lukashenko is trying to balance the economic relationship with Russia focusing on the Belarusian political and military support to Russia. When Russia does step forward to Belarus, Lukashenko also makes positive steps to please Russia (for example, he agreed to buy Russian materials and invite Russian professionals to build the new Atomic station in Belarus, Belarusian military troops are a part of the military defensive union with Russia, and the like). However, there is an opinion that Putin stopped the economic benefits for Belarus because

Lukashenko did not support Russia in several important political issues. First, it happened in relation to Georgia during the military clashes between Russia and Georgia. Lukashenko did not cut the official relationship with Georgia and did not recognize political independence of the two autonomous republics belonging to Georgia but declared independent (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This conflict took place in 2008. When air transportation was cut between Georgia and Russia, Belarus built a “bridge” opening new several air routes between these states via Minsk.

Second, visible political contradiction between Russia and Belarus is the assessment of Russian-Ukrainian conflicts after Maidan revolution (2014), and especially their results (self-declaration of Lugansk and Donetsk republics within the Ukraine, and shifting the Crimea to Russia). Belarus did not support these actions. Belarus demonstrated “a political distance” from Russia: Republic of the Crimea was not recognized as a Russian region, citizens of Belarus were “not recommended” to travel to the Crimea, all kinds of transportation to the Crimea were cut, while the Ukrainian refugees were welcome in Belarus (now their number is more than hundred thousand people), etc.

When Russian-Ukrainian conflict looked totally unsolvable Belarus offered itself as a platform for the multilateral peaceful negotiations. Minsk has become a place for multilateral discussions between two conflicting countries, two self-declared republics, and two main countries of the European Union, Germany and France. The so called “Minsk platform” was recognized as “workable” by all the sides. All the above-mentioned sides met each other several times in Minsk. The important “Minsk agreements” were signed by all sides (however, these agreements were not implemented into the reality, and until now this military conflict is not resolved).

After president Lukashenko offered Minsk as a platform for peaceful negotiation of all the involved parties, the European Union softened its position towards Belarus. On this basis, started from 2015, EU attitudes toward the Republic of Belarus had changed. Since 2016 the anti-Belarusian sanctions were softened and then stopped (they are still not totally abolished, but temporary out of function).

Lukashenko made new steps toward the EU in autumn of 2015 when he performed some actions that the EU demands as conditions for further improvement of the relationship with Belarus. Thus, in Autumn of 2015, before the new presidential elections, Lukashenko released the political prisoners including Nikolai Statkevich, presidential candidate in 2010 (they were accused in criminal actions and violation of order while in reality they were political prisoners demanding free and fair elections). On October 11, 2015 new elections took place. Regardless of existence of several candidates, Lukashenko again was elected by the majority of voters. However, there were no protest actions and nobody was arrested, and the EU accepted the election results.

Following these political steps made by Lukashenko, and keeping in mind the

aim of strengthening the level of security in Europe, in October 2015 the EU temporarily postponed most of sanctions against Belarus. This situation was kept for four months. During this period Lukashenko did not allow Russian military base on the territory of Belarus and kept neutrality in Russian conflicts with Ukraine. Belarus did not stop economic relations with Ukraine – its economic partner from the East.

In winter of 2016, the EU decided to stop sanctions against most of Belarusian officials and keep them only against 4 military officials that were accused in disappearance of people in Belarus in 1999-2000. The United States suspended most of its sanctions against Belarus at the same time with the EU. However, the US always demanded that Lukashenka's government should genuinely respect and protect citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, and stressed the necessity of international monitoring of this situation in Belarus before the final decision on lifting the sanctions."

The situation remained positive in 2017. After the successful parliament elections in September 2016 that were recognized by the EU and assessed in positive, there is a chance that all sanctions will be banned soon.

Internal problems

Meantime, there are several internal contradictions and problems in Belarus, and many of them are usually under the critical attitude from the European Union. According to the regular sociological monitoring of the situation, the most important internal problem is a deterioration of economic situation. Economic decline may cause a significant decrease in the standard of living of the population. As Belarus does not have natural resources, it suffers from the total oil and gas dependency from Russia. This dependency was one of the reasons of Union between Belarus and Russia in the 1990s. On the basis of this Union, Belarus had cheap prices for gas and oil and even sold abroad the oil products made from Russian resources. Currently, under the economic crisis conditions, Russia does not want to make preferences for Belarus. Therefore, Belarus has enormous debts for the foreign organizations and/or countries (on average, more than \$1000 per person), it suffers from lack of resources, and still totally depends on Russia. There were attempts to diversify the supply of these resources (Azerbaijan, Venezuela), however, the cost was much higher than from Russia. Following the Russian influence and using the Russian loan, Belarus started to build the atomic station aiming to provide energy for the country and even sell it abroad to the EU neighbors. However, the place for this construction is not far from the border with Lithuania (in Grodno region). Therefore, this country constantly issues protests against this construction and demands to arrange political boycott against Belarus (*Lithuanian Seim 2017*); the border countries already declared that they would never buy energy from Belarus in the future. It means that the new atomic station will not improve the energy

situation for Belarus and its economy: there will be no possibility to sell the excessive energy to the neighbor countries. Therefore, Lukashenko is searching for money everywhere. He seems to balance between the East and the West because the current political regime needs external financial sources to survive and keep the social order in the country. At the same time new Russian conditions for providing new loans are tough, they still relate to the political conditions, and may decrease Lukashenko power. Therefore trade is a current driving force for Belarusian political regime, and the EU is an important trade partner for Belarus. Russia is a main partner in foreign trade: more than 50% of exported goods, especially oil, natural gas, and metals, are from Russia, and 40% of imported goods. European Union keeps a second place in the Belarusian commodity turnover: its share in Belarusian export is more than 30% and more than 25% of import. Belarus has the most developed economic ties with such European countries as the UK, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Belgium as well as Lithuania, Poland, Latvia and Czech Republic, i.e. both with the old and new EU member states. Currently, in 2017, due to the hard economic conditions, president Lukashenko is ready for any agreements with any country from the East and West and for economic concessions if they may help to keep Belarus independent and current political regime stable.

Russia is able to give a new loan to Belarus, however the unpaid Belarusian debt reached the enormous level: according to media sources, it is more than 1000 USD per citizen (*Gazeta.ru 2017*). If Russia would not introduce to Belarus the internal Russian prices for energy, Belarusian economy would not overcome this economic crisis. And there are no chances that Russia would do this.

New strict conditions from the world creditors (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) pushed Lukashenko to increase the population's payment for utilities and increased pension age in 2016. These acts were not welcome by the population; however, the social situation is still tolerable to the authorities.

Another kind of the problem is a situation with the civil society in Belarus. It is rather weak: it has small size because not many people are involved in any public activities beyond the official (regime sponsored) activities. People are afraid of such activism, and many lost their hopes for better life and democracy, while the rest are simply focusing on survival issues and not interested in the public life at all. Economic situation influences public opinion and behavior more than civil society (there is a wording: refrigerator is stronger than TV, i.e. wellbeing is more influential than the official propaganda). Still, small civil society exists regardless of hard conditions: it always nominates candidates for presidential election and uses electoral campaign for anti-Lukashenko propaganda. The civil society groups include part of academic intellectuals, other groups of professionals, all those in the market – all together 25-30% max. Almost all of them will not politically act as long as possible as there are legitimate tools to punish them (due to the laws). There are small opposition political parties and youth sections among them. Additionally, the

legal opposition media exist as well (news agency BelaPAN, for example). Belarusian journalist and writer (employed at foreign news agency) Svetlana Aleksievich became a Nobel winner in 2015.

Finally, the unsolved political problem of democratization and economic reforms in Belarus resulted in the lack of viable alternatives to the present political system and the current president. Western subsidies for opposition leaders are not enough to resist Lukashenko, and Russia would hardly support any opposition candidate if he would be against the Russian military bases and full cooperation between Russia and Belarus. And all the opposition candidates stand against such bases. Only a potential candidate loyal to Russia might easily find Russian support for his victory in Belarusian election. However Lukashenko does not plan to leave the office himself and keeps the relationship with Russia as his priority. Probably, the most important factor to back the current political regime is the population that still trust Lukashenko and support his rule at least on the level of 50%, while the proportion of his direct opponents is much smaller (between 10% and 20%). The rest of the Belarusian population is neutral or not interested in politics at all: they will be calm at any political regime if their private interests are not involved.

Belarusian state elites around Lukashenko are weak as he selects only those individuals who obeys him. They do not have their own initiatives and creativity to reform the country. Russian support depends on Lukashenko's loyalty to Russia as well.

IV. BELARUS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Political disagreements between Belarus and the EU

There are several issues that divide Belarus and the European Union politically. These issues relate primarily to the restriction of democratic procedures and violation of human rights, and to the border control.

Belarus is the only one European state that still remains the capital punishment as its law. The Human Rights Watch stated in the annual (2016) report (www.hrw.org), that “the death penalty remains in use. Officials pressure and arrest human rights activists and critics on spurious charges. Authorities regularly harass independent and opposition journalists. Legislative amendments further restricted freedom of expression, in particular Internet freedom”. The European Union put an issue of death penalty ban as important condition for the improvement of its relationship with Belarus. In 2015 Belarus expressed its readiness to discuss this issue with the Council of Europe, however, death penalty is still in function.

A second issue relates to the arrests and harassment of human rights defenders and government critics. Belarusian authorities interfere with the work of inde-

pendent and opposition journalists and bloggers. Law enforcement officials intensified prosecutions of independent freelance journalists for cooperation with unregistered foreign media. There were several cases against journalists, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists. All cases resulted in significant fines for the journalists. Freedom of association is also violated in several aspects. Thus, the authorities continue to enforce legislation criminalizing involvement in an unregistered organization, and at the same time arbitrarily deny registration to and attempt to dissolve nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The EU programs for Belarus and Eastern European region

At the same time, Belarusian authorities appeared to be seeking a political rapprochement with European governments and institutions, and hosted a number of high-level visits. This means that Belarusian government started new steps toward the European Union wishing to improve the relationship. Among the discussed issues are migration, regional conflicts, border control, etc. These issues are constantly in the agenda for political discussions: «Today's European Union faces years of financial crisis, stagnant growth, rising levels of unemployment and illegal migration» (Korosteleva 2017). Currently, more than one million new migrants already live in the EU, and even more migrants want to follow this way and enter the EU. Non-stop unlimited and uncontrolled migration has become a serious challenge to the EU, especially taking into account terrorist attacks already happened in France and Belgium. Therefore, security has become a core value. For strengthening the borders and preventing the waves of migrants that have no legal basis to claim refugee status, the EU tries to sign the agreements on migration with the neighbor countries and keep the borders safe and secure. Actually this goal was important for many years, therefore, the EU established several special programs of cooperation with its neighboring countries (mainly, the Mediterranean and Eastern European states).

The 2004-2007 EU enlargements have brought Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and especially Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine closer to the EU borders. Therefore issues of bilateral security and stability have become more important, and the special program was designed aimed to solve this issue. The EU started the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and developed different means to reach out and to shape the outside by its own standards. This included several financial and policy instruments focusing on different aspects of regional development in Eastern Europe. Some of them were more popular, some failed soon.

Program of Eastern Partnership (EPP) was established in 2008. A joint declaration was signed in Prague in 2009. It included 6 ex-soviet states: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine that have borders with the EU, and Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Asian region. Eastern partnership program put forward ideas for enhancing the EU's relationship with the region, including in the field of home af-

fairs. It was officially based on a commitment to the principles of international law and fundamental values – democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms (Freyburg *et al.* 2011). It also encompassed support for a market economy, sustainable development and good governance. In the future these six countries were viewed as friendly allies to the EU. Therefore Program of Eastern Partnership had two sides: political and economic, and economic funds depend on political steps made by any of the ex-soviet republics toward the EU requirements. This program was successful for the EU in many aspects: soon the so called “colored revolutions” took place in Ukraine and Moldova that led to radical changes in their foreign policy and attitude to Russia. Georgia got rid of Russian influence even before joining Eastern Partnership Program. Therefore, in 2014 the EU signed the Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and the European Parliament passed a resolution recognizing the “European perspective” of these three post-soviet countries. In 2017 the EU opened the border for Ukrainians (cancelled visas) and promised to discuss the issue of Ukrainian inclusion into the EU in the future (however, according to the Eastern Partnership strategy, the EU is unlikely to accept these states in the near years, this is a future perspective for them).

The situation with Belarus differs greatly. Eastern Partnership Program did not meet Lukashenko’s expectations, it was poorly funded for Belarus: practically, European money went only to the projects on strengthening the border control and not to the economic development of Belarus. No political benefits were provided for Belarus as well (for example, visa cost for Belarus is 60 euro, while for other countries in the region it is 30 Euro or free). Negative evaluation of presidential campaigns (2006, 2010) as well as sanctions did not positively influence the relationship with the EU. Therefore, although Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership program, this program was not actively supported by Lukashenko. He did not change political priorities of Belarus and did not make a turn from Russia to the EU, like the above-mentioned three republics in Eastern Partnership Program. On the contrary, Lukashenko increased security for his regime and prevented any opposition attempts to start the “color revolution” in Belarus.

However, the EU political goals in EPP did not take into account the interests of eastern European countries and understand them as equal partners: the “*othering*” or differentiation of Eastern European countries was interpreted as *deviation*, if they did not accept the EU values and norms. As Korosteleva explained, the EU failed in «imagine a new social order which would give a relational value to the *Other*» (Korosteleva 2017). National priorities of Belarus as expressed by President Lukashenko (including its close relationship with Russia) have never been accepted by the EU. In the official EU-Belarus talks until recently (i.e. the Russia-Ukraine deterioration of relations in 2014) Belarus in general was treated as a “a bad guy” who still had to provide security on the EU borders and accept the EU interests.

The EU always interfere ex-soviet space, supporting some countries and isolating others. With the spatial imaginaries of European Neighborhood (ENP), the EU is itself actively engaged in re-configuring borders on its external frontiers and between post-Soviet states. It has been doing this in many ways: first, by advancing a regional cooperation agenda that targets national modernization and convergence to the EU norms; second, by developing a new security area that aims at stopping the undocumented immigration and addressing other perceived threats; and, third, through an implicit policy of creating a buffer zone between the EU and the Russian Federation's direct sphere of influence (Titarenko 2016). These different objectives are contradictory and often problematic – they contain both progressive elements of potential regional partnerships but also exclusionary and discriminatory aspects (BelaPAN 2012). Finally, and with a view to future scenarios of deeper regional cooperation, there are discontinuities between domestic political agendas in neighboring states and the EU's Neighborhood Policy, especially in the form of border-transcending tasks set out in the 2003 Wider Europe document.

By now ENP remains unfulfilled because a unilateral EU policy does not work similar in regard to different countries. Currently the ENP supported traditional western geopolitical thinking, – EU-centrism while eastern states (including Belarus) wanted more equality in the relationship with the EU. This equality can be a good platform for further improvement of the relationship between Belarus and the EU.

Current changes in the EU-Belarus relations

The EU has some own interests for the improvement the relationship with Belarusian regime. In the nearest past the EU planned to construct anti-Russian ring from the former soviet republics that exist on the borders of Russia. European Partnership program included 6 republics: Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Five out of six countries got better conditions for traveling to the West and 4 experienced some kind of revolutions (except for Azerbaijan and Belarus as the most conservative and most authoritarian among six). Now Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia follow Western way and considered more democratic and liberal. Armenia made step back and joint Eurasian Union (due to Russian financial support and due to the Nagorny Karabach where Russia latently support Armenia against Azerbaijan). Azerbaijan went its own (Asian) way – also independent from Russia. Only Belarus was a failure of the EU, regardless of many years of sanctions imposed on Belarus: they did not help the EU to reach their goals in the EU – Belarus relationship (European 2012).

The current interests of the EU in the improvement the relations with Belarus are more pragmatic: EU does not demand Belarus any more to follow the European values. The EU pre-conditions included only free and fair presidential election and release of political prisoners. Lukashenko met both conditions in 2015. More

than that: he made first step forward the EU when he did not recognize Crimea as Russian part in 2014, did not drop relations with Ukraine later on (even increased trade) and provided a political space for peaceful negotiations between Russia-Ukraine-Donetck – Lugansk under the supervision of Germany and France (Normandy format). All parties met in Minsk several times and elaborated agreements to stop shutting and make special conditions for Donetck and Lugansk as parts of the Ukraine. As a result of several meetings in Minsk, the so called Minsk Agreements were achieved and recognized as a Road Map for solving the crisis. However neither Ukraine nor Russia performed according to these agreements, and situation is still not fixed. Nevertheless, Belarus tries to follow this neutrality (as well as it was earlier when Northern Ossetia and Abkhazia were not recognized as independent).

The EU also wants to strengthen the EU-Belarus borders as through this border people from Russia can try to enter the EU (as people do on the Russian-Finnish border). So, terrorism and migration are the reasons behind EU, as well as desire to make Russia weak if Belarus, its ally, will play this game (in-between). Still, no real improvement in conditions for visas have been made (they were only promised and discussed), and citizens of Belarus still pay 60 euro per visa. Only sanctions from Lukashenko and other Belarusian authorities were waved (terminated).

New loan was promised by the West and partly provided, but it was not enough for economic needs of Belarus. Further conditions for getting western loans are not acceptable for Lukashenko (they can turn to social explosion). On the other side, Russia also agrees to provide further financial support under some political conditions (military bases, higher oil price, etc.) That is why this balancing of Belarus between the West and East is not stable, it is uncertain which preference can be made in the future. Still, as the EU does not accept any “president-for-life”, Lukashenko may be afraid of too close relations with the West – either political or economic. For this reason, in the last years, Lukashenko developed good relations with China: this country received economic preferences, and several Chinese investments into Belarusian economy was made. For China, Belarus is a part of Chinese bridge to the West (a part of the “new Silk Road”). It is quite possible that Belarus (like Russia) would prefer to develop its closer relationship with China in case of more obstacles or difficulties in the relationship with the European Union.

With the 2014 Ukrainian crisis in mind, the important question can be raised why Belarusian authoritarian regime being afraid of Maidan, still keep very close ties with Ukraine and do not support Russia in the conflicts with Ukraine. The same attitude took place earlier in regard to Georgia and its conflict with Russia. Although such attitude to Georgia and Ukraine may negatively influence Russian-Belarusian relationship, they are in place. Lukashenko runs this kind of foreign policy to demonstrate “political independence” to all neighbors, and at the same time there are no real changes in the EU-Belarus and the Belarus-Russia political relationship. Belarus is a close Russian partner in political and economic relation-

ship, while Belarus wants to become closer economic partner with the EU and all other countries to make the economic situation in Belarus more stable (have new loans, investments, make new trade agreements, etc.).

Recently great changes in the EU-Belarus relations were achieved. There were objective reasons for these changes. First, the objective trade needs made Belarus more important as a mediator between the EU and Russia. Also, after imposing sanctions on Russia the EU would appreciate to include Belarus into its trade relationship on a higher level and partly substitute Russia (indeed, following this strategy, Belarus re-sold many EU products to Russia).

Second, it is a new political situation in the region, related to Ukraine (since February 2014) and later, when the EU-Russia relations became worse because of Crimea issue (March 2014), and sanctions were imposed on Russia. Since 2014, Belarus played a role of political mediator between Russia and Ukraine and initiated the so called Minsk talks and then Minsk peaceful agreements aimed to stop military confrontation in Eastern Ukraine. Although this initiative did not bring the final decision to the situation in Ukraine, it helped to keep it under the control. Leaders of Germany and France visited Minsk to take part in the multilateral negotiations between all the involved parties (so called meeting in Normandy Format) in 2015. These peaceful steps by Lukashenko were positively accessed by the EU leaders.

Third, Belarus somehow demonstrated “a political distance” from Russia: Crimea was not recognized as a Russian region, citizens of Belarus were “not recommended” to travel to Crimea, all kinds of transportation to the Crimea were cut, Ukrainian refugees were welcome in Belarus, etc. (currently, hundreds of Ukrainians live in Belarus).

Last, but not least. Belarusian political regime made steps forward to the EU demands related to elections and prisoners. In 2015 all political prisoners were released, several candidates participated in 2015 presidential election were freed, and nobody was arrested as the result of new election. Lukashenko was recognized a winner again, however, the EU accepted the results.

To summarize the new interpretation of political situation.

a) Belarus is situated exactly on the borderland between Russia and the EU, it needs good relationship with both West and East. Thus, Russia is a main partner in foreign trade (more than 50% of exported goods, especially oil, natural gas, and metals, are from Russia, and 40% of imported goods). European Union keeps a second place in the Belarusian commodity turnover: its share in Belarusian export is more than 30% and more than 25% of import. Belarus has the most developed economic ties with such EU members as the UK, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Belgium among the “old EU states” as well as Lithuania, Poland, Latvia and Czech Republic among the former Eastern European (socialist) states.

b) Further strengthening of the economic ties with the EU is of great importance: currently the EU has become the main economic partner in economic

services (more than 50% of Belarusian profits go from transportation of goods between the West-East), where Russia holds only 25% of total amount. This tendency is growing during the last 10 or more years, therefore, Belarus is highly interested in good relationship with the EU. Keeping Russia as its geopolitical priority, Belarusian authorities want to diversify their economic ties with Russia and increase commodity turnover with the EU states. The authorities badly need financial support from both East and West, as economic stability is the basis of keeping the current political order untouched.

c) Contemporary Belarusian foreign policy can be viewed as more bilateral than earlier. Lukashenko is afraid to lose independence and therefore tries to keep distance from Russia in such issues as military bases, Russian business in Belarus, etc.

d) Lukashenko makes steps toward the EU and performs actions that the EU demands as conditions for improvement of the relationship. Lukashenko released the political prisoners in 2015, before the new election. The new elections took place further and their results (election of Lukashenko) were recognized by the EU.

e) Following these political steps made by Lukashenko, and keeping in mind the aim of strengthening the level of security in Europe, in October 2015 the EU temporarily postponed most of the sanctions against Belarus. This situation was kept for four months. During these 4 months Lukashenko did not allow Russian military base on the territory of Belarus and kept neutrality in relationship with Ukraine. Belarus did not stop economic relations with Ukraine – its economic partner from the East.

The United States suspended most of its sanctions against Belarus at the same time. However, the US always demanded that Lukashenko's government should genuinely respect and protect citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, and stressed the necessity of international monitoring of this situation in Belarus before the final decision on lifting the sanctions." In February 2016, the EU decided to stop sanctions against most of Belarusian officials and keep them only against 4 military officials that are accused in disappearance of people in Belarus in 1999-2000. The situation was carefully analyzed again after the parliament election in September 2016, and the overall assessment was positive. However, the principal changes in the composition of Belarusian parliament were not made, because only few opposition members were elected.

Migration, border security and border control

The concept of European Neighborhood has been a central element in policies of EU enlargement and the rearrangement of the Union's external relations with the neighbor-states. Belarus was on a periphery of implementation of this concept, although formally it was a part of it. European Union is trying to maintain a

meaningful leading role in the world and construct a new style of international relations in which partnership will contribute to a transcendence of previous traditional politics. Through this lens the EU tries to give the neighbor-states a new sense of (geo)political identity and include them into the sphere of the EU influence.

The EU's concept of Neighborhood was based on the premise that the EU has exportable values, norms and models of social development that can assist in the social transformation of neighboring states. At the same time, post-Soviet transformation has not only necessitated a renegotiation of state–society relations but also led to a comprehensive reconfiguration of Soviet-era political, economic and social ties. Belarus also changed the state-society relations, at least on their surface, but escaped the deep transformation. In Belarus there were no conflicts between the Soviet legacies and emerging nation-building strategies the new political regime introduced, while the EU instruments of imposing the so called European values and models were not accepted. As a result, there were no cases of resurgence of any regional or ethnic conflicts frozen during the Soviet time.

On a practical level, Belarusian state itself was aimed to secure its borders with the EU, and this desire coincided with the EU intention to strengthen the same border for its own interests – protection from unwanted migrants (as well as border control for traditional reasons – checking passports, goods, stop the drug and weapon illegal trade, etc.). There was no visible goal to finalize the borders of post-Soviet states or the borders between them and the EU; actually, this process by no means is completed. However, in case of Belarus there were no mutual demands or clashes related the borders. In general, migration is a part of internationalization of regional political contexts on the ex-soviet space and beyond. Migration relates also to the European and Eurasian integration attempt in the post-Soviet region. For Belarus, migration is a border-control issue because Belarus is like a transit zone for migrants from Russia to the EU. Therefore, improvement of the EU-Belarus relations include the issue of migration.

The EU tried to implement its common instrument of securing the border by signing the Readmission Agreements. While such agreements were already signed with other post-Soviet states, Belarus still did not sign it because the EU conditions were not balanced and not favored Belarus: the country had to promise to accept all migrants that crossed the EU-Belarusian border back to Belarus regardless of their nationality and country of origin. As most of the illegal migrants crossing this border are not citizens of Belarus, the readmission agreement might create a problem of dealing with such migrants. Therefore, Belarusian Interior Ministry has some obstacles for readmission. It is necessary to discuss, who can provide the funds for temporary migrants camps in Belarus? Who will fund their transportation to home countries? Belarus does not have readmission agreements with most of the countries, so that it might be difficult to deal with illegal migrants in the future.

For several years the EU took readmission agreement as a precondition for talks on visa facilitation for citizens of Belarus. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, Belarusian officials «are ready to sign the visa facilitation agreement. However, the European Union links visa facilitation agreements with readmission agreements» (Belarus' *MFA* 2017).

Finally, by the end of 2017, the positive talks between the experts of the European Union and the Belarusian Interior Ministry were finalized, and issues of readmission and visa facilitation were harmonized. The documents can be signed in 2018 (MIA, 2017). According to the view of Aleksei Begun, Head of the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Belarusian Interior Ministry, the readmission agreement can be signed in early 2018 and then ratified: «Despite the firm position of the EU experts, Belarus insisted on a transitional period for non-readmission of third-country nationals». (Belarus, EU, 2017). This decision is important for Belarus because of the necessity to prepare the infrastructure for accommodating illegal migrants, strengthen the logistics support for the interior bodies and border services. Belarus also needs to get ready for a change in the number of people that the EU may send to Belarus under the readmission obligations to be further sent to their home countries. the international technical assistance project, which will require some €7 million, envisages a number of events. The project is implemented by the EU with the help of the IOM Office in Belarus jointly with the interior bodies, border services, and a number of migration organizations. The project, scheduled for implementation in 2017-2022, envisages the construction of centers for illegal migrants both at the interior bodies and border services, infrastructure, vehicles for the transportation of illegal migrants, and information centers.

Therefore, there is a hope for further improvement of the EU-Belarus relationship and there are practical tools and instruments for the implementation of the agreed policies in the nearest years. When it happens it will be more options and chances for citizens of Belarus to communicate with the people from the European Union. It may mean the end of political isolation of Belarus in Europe and the world

With the 2014 Ukrainian crisis in mind, the question can be raised why Belarusian authoritarian regime being afraid of Maidan, still keep very close ties with Ukraine and do not support Russia in the conflicts with Ukraine. The same took place earlier in regard to Georgia and its conflict with Russia. Although such attitude to Georgia and Ukraine may strongly influence Russian-Belarusian relationship, they are in place. Lukashenko runs this kind of foreign policy to demonstrate “political independence” to all neighbors, and at the same time there are no real changes in the EU-Belarus and the Belarus-Russia relationship. Belarus is a close Russian partner in political and economic relationship, while Belarus wants to become closer economic partner with the EU and all other countries to make the economic situation in Belarus more stable (have new loans, investments, etc.).

V. CONCLUSION

Belarusian attempts to “become a bridge” between the two sides, the EU and Russia, keep political neutrality and non-involvement into the regional conflicts can be viewed from the EU perspective as positive. In contemporary global world it is clear that decisions for the conflict resolution and for economic crises can be found only through the peaceful dialogues and international compromises. The global experience proves the so called “humanitarian bombing and democratic coups” lead only to exacerbate the problems.

In March 2016 Belarus declared that the visa regime will be ease for citizens from the countries without serious migration problems. Indeed, currently foreigners from 80 states can visit Belarus without visa for a week period of time. The EU understands that Republic of Belarus can be neutral to the EU (not an ally, however), and it is in bilateral interests to support a fruitful dialogue with Belarus. Otherwise Belarus can join Russia totally in all geopolitical issues, and the EU cannot be able to find instruments of influencing Belarus in the future. Therefore, improvement of the relationship between the EU and Belarus is visible now.

There are issues related to the European Union that may prevent positive steps forward in Belarus-EU ties. It is mainly the threat of NATO for the whole region, especially for Russia, and therefore it is considered in the same way as a threat for Belarus in Minsk. As a reply to the new deployment of the US troops in Poland, Russia and Belarus arrange military trainings not far from the EU border, and this fact is considered by Poland and Lithuania as a «threat for security from Russia and Belarus» (MFA Belarus 2017). They express this attitude in their official statements, regardless of the explanation of the opposite sides that it is only a retaliatory act. Keeping the rhetoric of the Cold War in the foreign affairs, it is hardly to expect the improvement in the relationship between the EU and Belarus (especially between Republic of Belarus and its neighboring EU states Lithuania, Poland, Latvia). The only way out is increasing the level of trust, mutual respect of the national interests of the opponents, and their desire to cooperate rather than fight with each other.

Depending on further improvement of the relationship between Belarus and the EU, there are at least three potential options for their future. The most positive option is the full improvement of the relationship between Belarus and the EU. On this way forward, in October 2016 the EU launched a Mobility Partnership with Belarus to ensure a better management of migrant flows (EU launches 2016). Similar mobility agreements have been already signed with many countries of Eastern Europe. Belarus will continue the negotiation of such agreement in all details in the nearest future. Currently Belarus has the highest number of Schengen visas per capita in the world issued by the EU countries – more than 752 thousand in 2015.

At the same time 140 thousand citizens of Belarus got resident permissions (most of them from Poland) and left Belarus. The future agreement may improve management of migrants and enhance cooperation of experts on migration in Europe. The agreement on readmission to be probably signed in 2018 will further improve the EU-Belarus relationship as well.

The other option is the opposite: rejection of further agreements and freezing relationship between Belarus and the EU. This option is in line with the Cold War strategy. In case of worsening the EU-Russia relations Belarus may be involved in this political conflict. Finally, there is an option to keep the relationship as they are and try to maneuver between the EU and Russia. This option is temporary, as Belarus has to develop positive ties with both East and West, and for this aim the country needs in good (rather than neutral) relationship with the EU – the important economic partner and significant political power on the global level.

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