

UDC 327(476:4EC)

THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE MAIN STAGES OF THE RELATIONSHIP

A. A. DASTANKA^a

^aBelarusian State University, Nezavisimosti avenue, 4, 220030, Minsk, Republic of Belarus

The article discusses the relationship between Belarus and the European Union, the author distinguished stages, characterized by their features and problem fields. The author analyzed the existing EU instruments and initiatives in relation to Belarus, emphasized the importance of implementing the idea of “integration of integration”, namely non-opposing of Belarus’ membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Union State of Belarus and Russia, to cooperation with the European Union.

Key words: European Union; Republic of Belarus; stages of relations; economic cooperation; “integration of integration”.

РЕСПУБЛИКА БЕЛАРУСЬ И ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЙ СОЮЗ: ОСНОВНЫЕ ЭТАПЫ ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЙ

Е. А. ДОСТАНКО¹⁾

¹⁾Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Республика Беларусь

Рассматриваются этапы взаимоотношений Республики Беларусь и Европейского союза. Характеризуются особенности и проблемные поля данного взаимодействия. Анализируются действующие инструменты и инициативы ЕС в отношении Беларуси. Подчеркивается значимость реализации идеи интеграции интеграций, а именно непротивопоставление членства Беларуси в Евразийском экономическом союзе, Союзном государстве Беларуси и России развитию сотрудничества с ЕС.

Ключевые слова: Европейский союз; Республика Беларусь; этапы взаимоотношений; экономическое сотрудничество; интеграция интеграций.

Diplomatic relations between the European Communities (EC) and the Republic of Belarus were established in August, 1992, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA, 1995) and the Interim Trade Agreement (ITA, 1996) have been signed and ratified by Belarus [1]. PCA was ratified by seven EU member-states, but the ratification process has been suspended since 1997 [2]. Trade and Cooperation Agreement concluded by the European Economic Community and European

Atomic Energy Community with the USSR (1989) covers bilateral economic relations [3], and the Framework Agreement between the European Communities and the Government of the Republic of Belarus signed on 18 December, 2008 regulates technical cooperation. The Agreement on trade in textile products between the EU and Belarus imposing quotas on Belarus textile export was signed in 1993, then extended in 1995, 1999, 2003–2007, and cancelled in 2009¹.

¹Delegation of the European Union to Belarus. URL: http://eeas.europa.eu/belarus/index_en.htm (date of access: 10.02.2017).

Образец цитирования:

Достанко Е. А. Республика Беларусь и Европейский союз: основные этапы взаимоотношений // Журн. Белорус. гос. ун-та. Междунар. отношения. 2017. № 1. С. 15–20 (на англ.).

For citation:

Dastanka A. A. The Republic of Belarus and the European Union: the main stages of the relationship. *J. Belarus. State Univ. Int. Relat.* 2017. No. 1. P. 15–20.

Автор:

Елена Анатольевна Достанко – кандидат политических наук, доцент; начальник Центра международных исследований факультета международных отношений.

Author:

Alena Dastanka, PhD (political science), docent; director of the Center for International Studies, faculty of international relations.
dostanko@bsu.by

The following EU key initiatives apply to Belarus:

- *European Neighborhood Policy* (ENP, 2004), which is not active as the coordinated action plan with the European Commission for Belarus is not signed;
- *Eastern Partnership* (EaP, 2009), consisting of multilateral (four platforms plus six flagship initiatives) and bilateral (the signature of action plans, association agreements) formats. Belarus cooperates only within the multilateral format;
- *Northern Dimension*, Belarus takes part in Partnership on Environment;
- International technical assistance and cross-border cooperation projects within the *European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI)*.

For certain periods the European Union formulates the Strategy Paper and Indicative Programme identifying priority sectors for technical cooperation between the parties [4–6].

The relations between the EU and Belarus may be categorized into the following stages (somewhat conventionally):

- 1994–1996 (active phase, signature of PCA, ITA);
- 1997–2007 (ratification of the agreements is suspended, “frozen” political relations and the simultaneous development of economic cooperation);
- 2008–2010 (normalization of relations, high-level visits to Belarus by the EU representatives, the European Commission opened its Delegation in Minsk, accession to EaP);
- 2011–2012 (imposition of restrictive measures as the response to the 2010 presidential election events, decrease in the level of political contacts);
- 2013 – till present (intensification of contacts, negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements, consultations on the modernization, cancelation of the most of the restrictive measures).

EU – Belarus relations stages

1994–1996

The procedure of PCA preparation was launched on 1 October, 1994 when the EU Council invited the EU Commission to submit proposals for the directive changes in the negotiations with Belarus. In November, 1994 the EU Council approved for the European Commission the changed directives on the negotiations on PCA, which allowed EC to negotiate similarly with Ukraine and Moldova. PCA (109 articles and 8 appendixes) was initiated in December, 1994 and signed in March, 1995 [1]. It allowed to establish a comprehensive political dialogue, the inclusion of the article on development in PCA gave further possibility to transform PCA into the Free Trade Agreement.

In March, 1996 the Interim Agreement, comprising the most important provisions of PCA which do not require ratification by the EU member-states' parliaments, was signed. In April, 1995 the European Parliament adopted the resolution stating that respect for human and minority rights is the condition for PCA implementation. In October, 1996 the European Parliament adopted the resolution on the suspension of PCA ratification process and the enactment of the Interim Agreement. The reason for this was undemocratic, from the EU perspective, procedure governing the composition of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. After the EU delegations visits in January – March, 1997 the report on the situation in Belarus was presented, based on which in September the EU Council made a decision that “the EU and its member-states will conclude neither Interim Agreement nor PCA” which is actual till present [2; 7].

1997–2007

This period is characterized by the low level of political contacts and the simultaneous development of bilateral economic relations: during the whole pe-

riod of the existence of independent Belarus the EU has been ranked the 2nd after Russia in the country's turnover. Political relations were justified by the level of implementation by Belarus of the following EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe's requirements: the extension of Parliament's powers; representation of the opposition in the election commissions; to ensure equal access to state mass media; to bring electoral law closer to international standards. 2006 presidential elections, 2000 and 2004 parliament elections failed to meet key international standards for democratic elections according to OSCE missions. “Value” pressure approach underlined the EU policy towards Belarus: at the 2002 December summit in Copenhagen the EU reaffirmed its intention to build relations with the neighbouring countries on the basis of common European values.

On 11 March, 2003 the EU presented the document titled “Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A new Framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours” which became the framework for the formation of the European Neighbourhood Policy declared in 2004 as the instrument of cooperation with the neighbouring countries after Eastern Enlargement (2004) [8]. It should be noted that at that time the EU did not have any proposal as an alternative to the existing EU – Belarus relations. The major EU aim was to “bind the Republic of Belarus on the threshold of parliamentary elections 2004 to commensurate gradual process which should be focused on creating conditions for free and fair elections and, if to do so, on the involvement of Belarus in the neighbourhood policy, without compromising the position of the EU regarding the protection of shared democratic values” [8; 9].

In its official position, Belarus evaluated positively the initiative on the EU Neighbourhood Policy estab-

ishment as consistent with national strategic priorities in terms of convergence with the EU and the formation of the zone of "neighbourhood". It's necessary to note the activity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland: the Polish side initiated the development of the EU "Eastern Dimension", covering four countries – Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, proposed to institutionalize it in the form of Eastern European Regional Forum, and to create of the European space of political and economic cooperation in the mid-term perspective (as set out in non-paper).

However the European Union made a range of new tough decisions in relation to Belarus: the results of Parliament elections and referendum of 17 October, 2004 were not recognized, the visa ban for high-ranking Belarusian officials was introduced. Formally Belarus was included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), but its participation was once again subject to the requirements to carry out significant political and economic reforms. During this period, international technical assistance was provided to Belarus through the implementation of projects in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument, regional programmes of the Baltic Sea, "Poland – Ukraine – Belarus", "Latvia – Lithuania – Belarus".

In whole, this period is characterized by the absence of the balanced EU strategy towards Belarus, it was more of a set of short-term tactical actions which did not defuse tensions in the political sphere; the conditional involvement of Belarus in the European Neighborhood Policy; taking a decision to expel Belarus from the Generalized System of Preferences since June, 2007 resulting in financial losses for Belarus in trade relations with the EU; the beginning of the transition from the isolation policy to "step-by-step" strategy. The latter is reflected in the non-paper document representing a new, from the EU viewpoint, vision of the development of the relations with Belarus: "What the EU could bring to Belarus?" [9].

2008–2010

There was a new positive momentum caused both by the internal (parliamentary elections of September, 2008 and presidential elections of 2010) and external (Georgia – South Ossetia conflict in August, 2008, global economic crisis, non-recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Belarus) political developments.

The EU Council decision of 13 October, 2008, which regulated the relations between Belarus and the EU till January, 2011, stated that 2008 parliamentary elections failed to meet OSCE standards for democratic elections [10]. Nevertheless, some progress was observed during the electoral campaign compared to the previous elections, in particular cooperation with OSCE/ODIHR and the broad access of opposition to the media, as well as the release before the elec-

tions of the last political prisoners recognized as such internationally. It was also reported about the resumption of contacts with the Belarusian authorities and the 6-month suspension of the ban on entry into the EU countries of Belarusian officials subject to the restrictions. The list of 41 banned officials was narrowed to five people. The EU Council decision about the 6-month probationary period for our country was announced.

During this period a series of visits of high-level EU delegations and representatives took place, the toughness of EU institutions official documents rhetoric in relation to Belarus decreased [11].

Luxembourg held the first in 3-years' time meeting of the EU "ministerial troika" (Foreign Minister of the EU French Presidency B. Kouchner, European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy B. Ferrero-Waldner and the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy J. Solana) with Belarus Foreign Minister S. Martynov. On 5 November, 2008 during the visit of the EC delegation headed by the Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for External Relations of the EC H. Mingarelli there were discussed the issues about the activation of cooperation between Belarus and the EU and the initiation of the three new and important for Belarus areas of cooperation: products quality control, in the fields of standardization, the interaction of financial institutions both in the field of agriculture and food security.

On 18 December, 2008 the first visit to Minsk of the Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Belarus and Ukraine J. M. P. Teixeira took place. The EC Delegation was opened in Minsk. On 19 February, 2009 there was the first visit of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, during which he met with the President of the Republic of Belarus A. Lukashenko [12].

On 17 and 22 April, 2009 the meetings of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (the EU Presidency in the first half of 2009) K. Schwarzenberg and the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy B. Ferrero-Waldner with A. Lukashenko took place. On 7 May, 2009 the Belarusian delegation took part in the inaugural Summit of the EU Eastern Partnership programme [13]. On 27 October, 2009 in Luxembourg during a joint meeting the representatives of the Council of Europe and the European Union reaffirmed EU commitment to cooperation within Eastern Partnership and underlined the intention of Belarus to take further steps forward (such as the opening of the Council of Europe Information Point in Minsk) [14].

EU Council Decision of 13 October, 2008 was the beginning of a new stage of relations between the EU and Belarus: after a long-term period of limited

contacts at the highest level the principal decision on the resumption of dialogue with the Belarusian leadership was taken. However, these solutions were temporary, EU did not give up “value pressure” approach in relationship with the Republic of Belarus [13].

2011–2012

The European Union gave a negative assessment of the 10 December, 2010 presidential elections as well as the events around them. It was reflected in the EU Council decision of 31 January, 2011, which introduced restrictive measures (visa ban for a group of officials, the prohibition of a certain economic activity for some Belarusian companies) against Belarus. By the decision of 20 June, 2011 the EU Council imposed an embargo on arms and frozen the assets of a number of Belarusian companies. By the EU Council decisions of January and 15 October, 2012 the implementation of restrictive measures was prolonged [15].

2013 – till present

During this period till February, 2016 the EU policy toward Belarus was due to the Council’s decision of 15 October, 2012 and defined as the policy of critical interaction and directed restrictive measures [15]. Restrictive measures against a number of citizens and companies were lifted, and since the end of 2012 there has been the recovery and intensification of contacts between the EU and Belarus at a high level. On 15 February, 2016 the EU Council decided to cancel most of the restrictive measures against Belarus, thereby creating new conditions for the development of bilateral cooperation [16].

For the Republic of Belarus in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (2014–2020) there was formulated the Strategic Paper and Indicative Programme for the support of Belarus by the European Union in 2014–2017 which defined only technical cooperation. The document recognizes Belarus determination to participate in the Eurasian integration processes (membership in the Eurasian Economic Union), and the interest in supporting and strengthening of cooperation with the EU despite the difficulties in the political sphere. In 2014–2017 in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument 71–89 mln euros is allocated to Belarus for funding the projects in three key sectors: social inclusiveness (30 %), environment (25 %), local and regional economic development (25 %) [6].

At the beginning of 2014 there were initiated negotiations on signing visa facilitation and readmission agreements, as well as consultations on the issues of modernization for the cooperation between Belarus and the EU in this sphere [17]. The economic component of bilateral cooperation during the whole period of EU – Belarus relations developed actively: thus in November, 2014 the share of Russian Federation in the

total turnover of the Republic of Belarus amounted to 48.5 %, the EU – 26.6 %, Ukraine – 7.8 % [18]. Both Belarus and the EU on the official and expert levels stress that there are areas of unconditional mutual bilateral interest. It is trade and economic cooperation, cooperation on customs matters, transit infrastructure development, energy security, products quality control and the adoption of appropriate standards, the interaction of financial institutions in the field of agriculture and food security and, of course, cooperation on countering human trafficking and illegal migration. The development of sectoral cooperation can be the very essence of the mid-term cooperation between Belarus and the European Union. A Belarus – EU Coordination Group was set up providing a new consultative format for a structural political dialogue between Belarus and the European Union.

Both the EU and Belarus recognize the importance of comprehensive cooperation, but the ways to achieve this objective depend on a number of conditions: from the EU – political, related to human rights area, from Belarus – mainly economic (lifting of restrictive measures). The principle “less for less, more for more” applicable by the EU is ineffective both in bilateral relations and in the framework of Eastern Partnership. The integrity of the initiative itself is broken, the significant differentiation of EU relations with EaP countries in bilateral and multilateral formats is obvious. Within the multilateral format which Belarus partly takes part in, the major events from 2011 are the summits of Heads of States, annual meetings of foreign ministers, the creation of additional panels to four thematic platforms (economic integration and EU policies, democracy, governance and stability), NGOs took part in the Euronest meetings and in the activities of the Civil Society Forum.

Significant impact on the implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative had the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan; Russia’s countering to the EU value and political-economic pressure and, as a result, activation of Russia’s position in the post-Soviet space (entry into EAEU of Armenia on 10 October, 2014 and Kyrgyzstan on 8 May, 2015, trade disputes with Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova, Georgia in 2013–2014, the accession of the Republic of Crimea into the Russian Federation); events in and around Ukraine 2013–2016. With the exception of Belarus the other five EaP countries have unresolved conflicts of different kinds.

The results of the survey carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Belarus in October, 2013 show that 62.5 % (73.7 % in Brest region) are positive about the improvement of relations between Belarus and the EU. The results of July, 2014 survey showed that 12.2 % of the respondents would like to see Belarus as the member of the EU (this opinion is most

common among the young aged 23–39 – 24 %) [19]. The results of 2015 survey, carried out by non-governmental Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, showed that 58 % of the respondents did not support “Belarus’ accession to Russia”, 50 % had negative attitude to the entry into the EU [20].

Belarus has always been a consistent supporter of integration processes. The idea of “integration of integration” initiated by the Head of the State, namely non-opposing of Belarus’ membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Union State of Belarus and Russia to cooperation with the European Union, is implemented.

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Received by editorial board 16.02.2016.