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# The EU and Belarus: seizing the opportunity?

## Abstract

Belarus' domestic context and regional outlook have altered considerably, opening up opportunities for cooperation and change. This policy analysis examines the EU's approach to the country in order to discuss its policy success and failures, and how to make it more sustainable in the future. It advances three particular tenets, which could make Belarus more responsive, resilient and, through inter-regional cooperation, more compatible: (1) Belarus, as a small state, prioritises a 'balancing strategy' with its greater regional powers. Acknowledging and engaging its geopolitical complexity would make EU-Belarus cooperation more enduring. (2) Belarus, like every other state in the eastern region, is normatively different, and requires a tailored approach to develop shared values. A more interest-driven technical cooperation may increase Belarus' commitment and socialisation into the international system of norms and standards. (3) The EU needs to recognise and engage with the EEU to increase its own leverage in the region. By empowering individual member states, the EU would contribute to their resilience as well as to making the EEU trading bloc more structurally sound, stable and open for dialogue. Recognising the above tenets is not about stating the obvious, but rather ensuring a more inclusive and sustainable form of EU cooperation for the benefit of the wider region.

## 1 Introduction

This policy analysis examines the EU's approach to Belarus, with the aim of making it more sustainable – that is, more effective, legitimate and compatible – in the future. Premised on a series of original cross-temporal research studies conducted in Belarus in 2008, 2013 and 2016, and through specialist knowledge of the country, the analysis advances three core tenets, which challenge existing conventions of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)[1], and at the same time help facilitate principled pragmatism in EU external relations and foster resilience in the neighbourhood, as set out by the new Global Security Strategy (GSS 2016).

First, the analysis notes that Belarus is a small state, and that, consequently, it behaves like one – that is, it behaves like a maverick and is rent-seeking and recalcitrant. For policy-makers, this may sound problematic; for scholars of International Relations, it presents an opportunity. This is because small states are normally responsive to external opportunities, and may challenge the existing status quo as a way of redressing regional security misbalances where political dialogue is at a deadlock. The analysis explores the context and opportunities which may prove propitious for reinvigorating EU-Belarus relations and enhancing Belarus' role in the region.

Second, the analysis claims that Belarus, like every other state in the post-Soviet space, is normatively different to that of the EU. Moreover, not only is the country aware of its normative distinction, especially in terms of the values

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1 The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative for cooperation and association between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

that differentiate it from the West; it is increasingly self-conscious and protective of its own identity. The analysis claims that the EU's conventional approach of 'naming-and-shaming' and demanding convergence on EU terms, has unintentionally contributed to the reinforcement of the regime, rather than its modernisation. In contrast, the recent EU practice of low-key technical engagement, premised on joint interests and shared ownership in some sectoral areas, has succeeded at developing traction with the government and making constructive policy inroads at different levels. The opportunities for expanding this engagement are discussed further in the text.

Third, the analysis recommends that the EU's approach must not be binary, enforcing a choice between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), or selective, especially in terms of 'regional partnerships', as postulated by the 2016 GSS. Instead, it should be all-inclusive, exploiting opportunities to defuse inter-regional tensions and to develop compatibility between the EU and the EEU and its member states. The EU's currently dichotomous approach causes deep anxiety and frustration in the neighbourhood; thereby unintentionally contributing to the endurance of historical alliances and diminishing the prospects for bringing stability and resilience back to the region.

Finally, the analysis concludes with a set of recommendations concerning how to make the EU-Belarus relations more enduring and sustainable.

## 2 Belarus is a small state and behaves like one

The behaviour of smaller states in international practice has traditionally been a source of concern and disquiet among policy-makers and practitioners, especially in relation to their ability to commit and deliver. As a rule, smaller states, particularly those positioned on the fissure between major power constellations (e.g. the eastern neighbourhood, sandwiched between the EU and Russia), would often lend themselves to a conventional critique of their maverick-like behaviour, for being non-committal, recalcitrant and rent-seeking, with one purpose only – to reinforce their regime's grip on power to ensure its stability. While this may be true, the issue is far more complex than has previously been understood. By the European External Action Services´ (EEAS) own admission, the global environment has radically changed, becoming more connected, contested and complex (EEAS 2015). With it, changes in the balance of power are also observable: the international system has become more fragmented and increasingly multi-order (Flockhart 2016). Consequently, traditional security constellations and greater powers struggle to exert influence and stay in control over their external environment, while smaller states seem to be enjoying more bargaining power and growing input into the security (im)balance, locally and globally.

It is therefore important to gain knowledge about smaller states, in order to develop better capacity for predicting and estimating smaller states' contributions to the global order, which hitherto have relied on the greater powers' imagery of the outside. As Keohane argued four decades ago:

> "These are the badgers, mice and pigeons of international politics, and in many cases they have been able to lead the elephant… it is evident that small states on the rim of the alliance wheel can pursue active, forceful and even obstreperous policies of their own… and [we] have to listen to them and believe them as well" (1971:161–3).

Hence, understanding their reasoning, intentions and patterns of behaviour may render a new outlook on how to leverage their behaviour, but it can also help them to develop their potential and enable them to find a role to play. This is particularly instructive for the case of Belarus, a small state, situated between the EU and Russia/EEU, with which the EU has no formal bilateral relations; and yet, the country, which (akin to Azerbaijan) is ready to engage but on its own terms, has come to play an important mediating role in the conflict-torn eastern region. Let's explore the following core tenets.

### 2.1 Small states behave like mavericks and are non-committal

It is true that negotiating or let alone demanding compliance from smaller states has always been a challenge for established powers, including the EU. For example, it took several years of negotiation and several rounds of rejection (including an Association Agreement proposed by the EU, and a Strategic Modernisation Partnership proposed by Azerbaijan), before a Strategic Partnership Agreement was finally reached between the EU and Azerbaijan in May 2016; and even that required careful negotiations to ensure its future effective implementation (Van Gils 2016). Smaller states are very protective of their interests and sovereignty, and can be as difficult or easy to deal with as suits their own and wider regional agenda, which makes it important to understand their perspectives and needs. As Keohane contends, "why should the small state make special sacrifices to strengthen its alliance or to abide by the spirit as well as the letter of the agreement? Recalcitrance may appear a better course than enthusiastic and self-sacrificing cooperation" (Ibid:163). Defiance and non-commitment for smaller states is

tantamount to skilfully managing their finite resources and leveraging their prospects for survival in an increasingly restrictive international environment. Hence, demanding large-scale political change, without contextualisation, is more likely to cause resistance and rejection than generate compliance and ownership.

Belarus presents a particularly instructive case, where rejection, resistance, oscillation and 'non-commitment' have defined Lukashenko's regime. Just as the country signed its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1995, it renegaded from its commitments (most notably with respect to human rights) within a year, forcing the EU Member States to suspend the PCA ratification and sanction and isolate the country for almost a decade (Goujon and Lynch 2005). Ironically, the government felt strangely relieved,[2] especially in anticipation of the costly and painful long-term obligations to modernise to European standards. Instead, the loss of contractual relations with the EU was swiftly compensated for by a series of less-demanding treaties with Russia,[3] leading to the creation of the Union State[4] with no defined terms and conditions.[5] Throughout the next decade, President Lukashenko, however, feeling confined by and vulnerable to Russia's pressure (Balmaceda 2014), made a series of reconciliation attempts with the West, albeit without tangible results (Korosteleva 2011): as soon as the EU political conditionality was back on the table (especially in 2010, prior to the presidential election), the government was in retreat to a zone of limited responsibilities – as part of the defunct CIS and a paper Union with Russia. The most instructive aspect, however, appears to be the process of Belarus' negotiations with Russia over its membership in the Eurasian Customs and later Economic Unions (ECU and EEU).[6] The country resisted every opportunity to be drawn into a new and seemingly unfavourable contractual framework, which it saw as undermining its sovereignty and interests. To delay the process, the government resorted to a series of 'petty wars' with Russia – from milk and sugar to energy issues – and succeeded in stalling the EEU launch by a number of years. However, even on becoming a member, Belarus felt more apart than part of the emergent trading project (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014), manifesting its discontent by way of defying trade regulations, rejecting Russia's unilateral embargo on EU goods, and questioning Russia's current approach to Ukraine.[7]

To understand the rationale behind Belarus' recalcitrance and lack of commitment is not simply to state the obvious. Rather, it is about anticipating these 'swings', understanding the needs and exploiting opportune moments to make relations more tractable. In the case of Belarus, this means that demands of political conditionality, sanctions, isolation, and the pledge to 'work with the country, but not the government' (European Commission 2006) may not necessarily yield effective and enduring EU-Belarus relations. The lack of political dialogue, however, could be overcome by other means – of sectoral and technical engagement (Korosteleva 2015) – as part of the new EU security strategy of principled pragmatism, to open doors for change and modernisation, as discussed in sections 2 and 3.

## 2.2 Small states value agility and 'strategic balancing'

Paradoxically, with a lack of commitment often comes more agility and responsiveness to external opportunities, and in Belarus' geopolitical context, also 'strategic balancing' between the two greater powers – the EU and Russia. 'Strategic balancing' involving pragmatic bargaining without major commitments has become a key policy, which is fundamental for the endurance and survival of Lukashenko's regime; and it is now stipulated in all major official policy documents, having gained more prominence since 2007.[8] The 'balancing strategy' was already manifest during the process of development of the Belarus Foreign Policy Doctrine from 1993 to 1997 (Ulakhovich 2001),

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2 Author's interview in 1996 with members of the Belarusian Parliament.

3 During 1995–99 the two countries signed a number of bilateral agreements, including the Treaty of Friendship (21/02/95), the Treaty on a Community of Sovereign Republics (02/04/96), the Russia-Belarus Union Chapter (23/05/97), the Treaty on Equal Rights of Russian and Belarusian Citizens (25/12/98), and the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State (08/12/99).

4 For more information about the 'Union State' please see https://mfa.gov.by/en/courtiers/russia/.

5 Some scholars have even suggested that the Union State became defunct even before the signature stage, so non-committal were the intentions of the Belarusian government towards fulfilling their obligations (Balmaceda 2014).

6 See Dragneva and Wolczuk (2012) for more details.

7 See the latest negative comments of President Lukashenko on their integration project, 20 September 2016, available at http://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-wants-russia-to-decide-on-future-of-integration-projects-94591-2016/.

8 Just as Belarus formally committed to the ECU and the future EEU.

during which explicit references to either the EU or Russia were toned down and even removed. More recently, 'strategic balancing' has been reaffirmed in Belarus' Economic Strategy 2015–2030 (NIEI 2015), Foreign Policy course (2016),[9] and Military Doctrine (2016). Belarus' Economic Strategy, for example, contends that Belarus must give priority to becoming a member of WTO (NIEI:57), developing strong economic relations with both the EU and the EEU, and sectoral cooperation particularly with Poland, Ukraine and Russia (Ibid:61). Belarus' trade figures in 2015 reflect this 'balancing strategy', with Russia (39%) and the EU (32%) having become the two top global partners for Belarusian exports; and the EU's role keeps growing with respect to Belarus' imports and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), balancing Russia/EEU's market dependency (20%; 8.5% growth rate since 2014; DG Trade).

At the core of Belarus' Foreign Policy priorities are 'good neighbourly relations' with all parties, which President Lukashenko noted back in 2007, ironically as he was signing the ECU treaty: "There can be no other way – we are an open country in the centre of Europe. We cannot and must not, by force of our geographical and historical location, prioritize one and be close to the other" (Lukashenko 2007).[10] In 2008 this strategy came to be known as the Golden Rule of Lukashenko's foreign policy:

> "…Belarus' foreign strategy is based on three fundamental principles: political sovereignty, economic openness and equal partner relations with other countries. The 'Golden Rule' of our foreign policy is multi-vectoredness and interest in reciprocal contracts…" (Lukashenko 2008) [11]

In 2016, Belarus MFA explicitly stated that:

> "Belarus is eager to use in full the potential of strategic partnership with Russia bilaterally, in the framework of the union State and other post-Soviet integrations. A comprehensive bilateral agenda is necessitated by geographical, historical factors, mutual complementarity of economies and close cooperation among the enterprises of both states… Among foreign policy priorities of Belarus in Europe is increased partnership with the EU countries, in the areas of mutual interest, including trade and investment, transport, transit, cross-border and regional cooperation, energy, and environmental protection.[12]

Belarus' late Military Doctrine (2016) is another instructive example of 'balancing': while committed to reinforcing both the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the joint initiatives with the Union State, the Doctrine explicitly stipulates that these types of activities are subject to Belarusian law, which strictly forbids the participation of Belarusian Armed Forces in any military operations abroad (Ibid: 15). This explicitly underscores the defensive status of Belarus' military and that it is open to building new alliances with countries other than Russia and the CSTO (Sivitski 2016). Recent efforts by Belarus' government to moderate the dialogue between the EU and Russia over Ukraine, to establish links with the US military for training purposes (Bohdan 2016)[13] and to develop technical military cooperation with China concerning the multiple launch rocket systems 'Palanez', serve as testimony to Belarus' 'strategic balancing', aiming to retain its independence and agility in response to external opportunities.

Remaining agile vis-à-vis its neighbours yields particular benefits for Belarus: it helped to sustain its miraculous growth until 2008, with an average of 11–14% rise in national GDP (J. Korosteleva 2007). And after the 2008 financial crisis, which also affected Russia and the eastern neighbourhood, Belarus has explicitly pursued a diversification strategy, with Russia and the EU being its top trading partners, followed by China and Ukraine. Belarus is now member of the EEU, but is not restricted to seeking and engaging in bilateral partnerships with other international players.[14] A renewed dialogue with the EU may present particularly attractive opportunities, as is reflected in the steady growth of EU imports from Belarus and its outward FDIs.[15]

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9 http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_policy/priorities/

10 President Lukashenko's State of the Nation Address, 24 April 2007, available at http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/ezhegodnoe-poslanie-prezidenta-belarusi-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-respubliki-belarus-5869/

11 Lukashenko's speech delivered at a meeting with Belarusian students, 12 February 2008, available at http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-belarusi-aglukashenkon-na-vstreche-so-studentami-bgu-5872/

12 http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_policy/priorities/ accessed in September 2016.

13 http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-single-air-defence-system-bring-belarus-closer-russia-25295.

14 This issue of the compatibility between the EU and the EEU, which Belarus seeks, will be explored in the final section of this policy analysis.

15 http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113351.pdf.

### 2.3 Smaller states could alter the status quo where the security balance is distorted and political dialogue is in deadlock

This is where smaller states particularly matter: what larger states take for granted, smaller states as a rule have to fight for. They do so, however, in their own 'narrow way', concentrating on maximising their vital interests and ignoring almost everything else, for the stability and sovereignty of their own territory are their number one priority. The consequences of their actions, especially in today's increasingly connected world, could either be destabilising (e.g. Syria, Ukraine), or opportune in terms of redressing regional security imbalances. As Moravcsik has argued, "there are situations where a leader of a weaker state may raise the cost of no-agreement to key constituents on the other side, thus rendering even unfavourable agreements relatively more attractive" (as cited in Balmaceda 2014: 8).

Belarus, if empowered and supported, may come to play an important regional role as a conflict-mediator, as it volunteered to do in 2015, with the intention of brokering a dialogue between the EU and Russia over the military stand-off in eastern Ukraine (known as the Minsk Agreements). Furthermore, if empowered to safeguard its own interests within the EEU by claiming WTO membership and gaining access to an increasing range of international business opportunities, Belarus, alongside other members of the EEU, may have the potential to assist in redressing the security imbalance created by Russian actions in the eastern region. This means that, not only could Belarus exercise a veto right to make Russia's economic and political behaviour more orderly and leveraged; it could also reinvigorate the trading bloc itself, by making it structurally sounder and more open to the opportunities of harmonisation with other economic partners in the region, including the EU.[16]

## 3 Belarus is normatively different but open to cooperation

### 3.1 Public perceptions: feeling positive while remaining different

Since the launch of the EaP in 2009, when the EU firmly became part of Belarus' Foreign Policy agenda, public perceptions about its larger neighbour have become considerably more appreciative, reflecting the government's 'balancing strategy' in external relations. In particular, our cross-temporal analysis of public surveys and focus groups conducted in 2009, 2013, and 2016 suggest that the EU's continued (even if limited) sectoral engagement with the country has had a positive impact on the public perception and image of the EU, especially in terms of facilitating convergence and exploring joint interests in economic, political, security, and other areas of cooperation.

Our surveys indicate increasing levels of awareness about the EU (96%) and *cognizance* about its structure, functions, and policies, as compared to any other international organisation cited in the poll. This is further reinforced by an almost a twofold increase of interest in EU affairs (65%; +25 since 2009) and Belarus-EU relations in particular (70%; +22 since 2009). This is, however, on par with similar levels of interest in the EEU/CIS (64%; +21 since 2009) and Russia (88%, +6 since 2009).[17]

At least two thirds of the respondents are now familiar with the EaP initiative (~60%; a threefold increase since 2009) and also believe that a new and stronger framework of cooperation with the EU is now necessary (60%). This cooperation should focus primarily on strengthening the BY-EU economic and trade relations (48%), as well as liberalising the visa regime (20%) and delivering financial support (19%) to the country. The majority of respondents (54%; +12 since 2009) see the relationship with the EU as *very positive*, with a third highlighting its progressive nature.

The most important change is that the majority (51%; +16 since 2009) now believe that Belarus-EU relations are now found in common (rather than the EU's) values and interests – among which joint economic (47%; +13), security (and 45%; +10), and international legal (52%; +9) interests explicitly prevail. Moreover, a quarter of respondents contend that these relations are of a reciprocal and equal nature (+4 since 2009), which once again is in a stark contrast to the previous findings.[18] This sense of interest convergence, especially in the areas of economic development, could offer fertile ground for developing new

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16 The on-going work on an EU-Armenia partnership agreement, taking into account Armenia's membership in the EEU, could offer a useful way forward for supporting the progress in Belarus' relations with the EU.

17 For more information please see the survey briefs Korosteleva (2013) and Korosteleva (2016b), available at https://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/gec/research/index.html for the 2013 and 2016 results, as well as https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders/researchfindings/.

18 Our findings are corroborated by similar surveys recently run in the country. In particular, see Annual Survey Report: Belarus – 1st Wave (Spring 2016) available at http://www.enpi-info.eu/eastportal/publications//777/EU-Neighbours-East-Annual-Survey-Report:-Belarus---Spring-2016. The survey (pp. 10–14) confirms the value associations established by our survey, as well as the normative differences between the EU and Belarus.

forms of cooperation and contractual relations, which could in the long-term introduce new behavioural norms and expectations (Korosteleva 2015).

Although public perceptions and government narratives indicate a positive change, it is important to note that normatively Belarus continues to remain different – especially in terms of its values and associations –, which is imperative to recognise and engage with, while revising the EU foreign policy approach to the country and the region, more broadly.

Our temporal survey comparison reveals enduring patterns of normative associations which respondents attribute to the EU, the EEU, and their own country, with significant differences in the social modelling of democracy. In particular, the EU is determinedly associated with a liberal democracy model (Kurki 2010:372), premised on the values of market economy (48%), democracy (42%), economic prosperity (31%), human rights (29%), and personal freedoms (27%) – an astonishingly similar response to those in 2009 and 2013, which suggests a firmly fixed image of the EU by the respondents. A model which they in turn connect the EEU with offers a curious mix of qualities, a hybrid case, which, however, is closer to how the respondents depict their own country – what is known as a social-democratic model (Ibid: 373) in the wider scholarship:

**Liberal Democracy (EU)**
- Market economy (48%)
- Democracy (42%)
- Economic prosperity (31%)
- Human rights (29%)
- Personal freedoms (27%)

**Hybrid case (EEU)**
- Market economy (32%)
- Peace/stability (25%)
- Multiculturalism (24%)
- Economic prosperity (22%)
- Don't know (20%)

**Social Democracy (BY)**
- Peace/stability (61%)
- Security (46%)
- Multiculturalism (38%)
- Tolerance (26%)
- Cultural heritage (30%)

Interestingly, in relation to the EEU or Belarus, respondents do not seem to refer to 'democracy' as a value at all, but instead prioritise stability, security and cultural traditions, which is broadly reflective of the survey findings in 2009 and 2013 – while the same cannot be said about their perceptions of the EU. These findings indicate a profound normative difference in the associative models of democracy and the expectations that respondents continue to attribute and distinguish all three cases by.

At the same time, market economy as a value emerged for the first time, at the top of the list, to describe the EEU case by the respondents – a minor and yet important change. It suggests closer proximity between the EU and the EEU normative models in the respondents' eyes. This juncture opens a new opportunity for cooperation and economic convergence, especially given that the EEU model is perceived as a one to aspire to.

Why is acknowledging 'normative differences' important? First of all, normative associations capture the general public's immediate needs, concerns and expectations. Hence, decoding these perceptions is instrumental for devising a responsive and differentiated EU policy. Second, the EU approach has hitherto been shaped and driven by the EU's expected norms of behaviour, which are in stark contrast with those of Belarus (Korosteleva 2016a), resulting in unreciprocated unilateral promotion of EU values/norms and their limited acceptance among the Belarusians. Hence, a better understanding of what the associations are, and how to tap into them, to ensure greater policy legitimation, is a key priority for the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)[19] and EaP. Finally, being perceived as 'different' in international relations often leads to alienation and an association with 'threats' and 'insecurities' (Diez 2006). Hence, it is important to shift perceptions of 'differences' to those of 'distinctions', to ensure more a positive engagement and constructive dialogue.

## 3.2 Transformative Power Europe by other means

Knowledge of normative associations and differences is instrumental to the success of the EU neighbourhood policies, and may produce some unexpected transformative results in cases where formal relations are yet to be established.

[19] The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is a joint initiative for political cooperation and association between the EU and its neighbouring countries in North Africa, the Levant and Eastern Europe.

The EU has experimented with a series of low-key technical engagements with Belarus, avoiding direct references to political conditionality and democracy promotion (although human rights have still been prominently on the agenda). While bilateral relations have yet to be developed, the EU has had an impact on the country using the EaP's multilateral track and sectoral initiatives. Notably, through various thematic platforms for 2007–13, Belarus received over €300 million worth of funding in aid (some on-going since 2001), having become fully integrated in good governance, people-to-people, and socio-economic projects.[20] The latter has included investing in human capital (health, gender equality, education, social security, culture, and children), environment and energy, migration and asylum, citizens and local authorities, and food safety.[21] A European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian society was launched at the Commission's initiative on 29 March 2012,[22] and now involves, via specific projects, over 747 non-governmental organisations alone, which engage with EU-level activities.[23] The agenda of meetings was set by the Belarusian stakeholders, identifying priorities for support and investment in the forthcoming years; and the language of decision-making was output-driven, and codified to European standards. In 2013 the Dialogue, for example, initiated two new programmes for Belarus: BELMED – supporting reforms in the healthcare system (€8 million) and RELOAD-2, offering support for regional and local development in two regions – Grodno and Minsk (€3,5 million). Although limited in terms of direct contact with higher-levels officials, the Dialogue was effective at the lower levels (including the respective Ministries), and helped regional authorities, in particular, to identify and promote development strategies and support local communities through training and grant-identifying strategies.[24] As the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed, there were 59 on-going projects (with over 150 successfully completed in the past ten years, and many on-going after the Commission's assessment!) being implemented in Belarus under EaP initiatives, especially in the areas of border modernisation and customs infrastructure, energy, transport, environment, education, and culture – with the total budget having quadrupled since 2010.[25] For 2014–2017, the indicative allocation of funds is €129–158 million, in addition to €89 million in bilateral allocation.[26] For education, training, and support for civil society in 2014 alone, €19 million was provided as part of the Annual Action Programme.[27] In 2015, for projects focusing on social cohesion and employment, rural development, territorial planning, agriculture and food security, environment and sustainable management of natural resources, Belarus received over €24 million to support multiple projects and initiatives. Presently, the country participates in ERASMUS+, CBC, MOST, TAIEX, SOCIEUX instruments. In December 2015, a National Coordinating Unit for the EU TACIS programme in Belarus was replaced by the Centre for International Technical Assistance of EU (EU ITA) in order to support international technical assistance in Belarus and project implementation.[28]

How does this matter? In the absence of a direct bilateral framework, the EU's technical engagement matters enormously. Not only does it exercise a socialisation effect, by way of introducing new norms and patterned behaviour, it also encourages the production of new shared norms which may trigger a change in the normative and institutional fabric of Belarusian society (Korosteleva 2015). However, much more could be done than just simply activating technical ties in the areas of mutual interest. If the issues of incompatibility and the lack of dialogue between the EU and the EEU/Russia were addressed, even if indirectly, via EEU members, this could offer a whole raft of new opportunities for expanding EU leverage in the region.

## 4 Why does the EU need to develop a more inclusive and compatible approach?

### 4.1 The public is concerned with the security dilemma their government faces

Geopolitics is back on the agenda, manifest not only in political narratives and the military actions in Ukraine, but also in the altering public perceptions across the region. The conflict in eastern Ukraine has not only changed domestic and regional power configurations, it has also turned the

[20] http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/documents/eu_activities_in_belarus.pdf.
[21] EU ITA Centre in Belarus: Thematic programme reports http://cu4eu.by/en.
[22] See European Commission (2012a).
[23] http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/eap-flyer-results.pdf
[24] See European Commission (2013)
[25] See European Commission (2012a; 2012b)
[26] See EEAS (2014) 'Strategy Paper', p. 18.
[27] See European Commission (2014) 'Annual Action Programme
[28] http://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/projects/overview/index_en.htm.

hitherto competitive politics of the EU and Russia over the common neighbourhood into a conflict of allegedly incompatible trade policies, exacerbated further by a lack of political dialogue between the two powers. While for the EU 'managing the relationship with Russia represents a key strategic challenge' (GSS 2016:33), for the people of the region it is becoming a source of growing anxiety and deeply embedded insecurity. Belarus, accustomed to 'balancing' and 'bargaining' with the two great neighbours, has also begun to feel the weight of the growing disjuncture in the inter-regional status quo.

While the appreciation of the EU as a strategic partner of the country is steadily rising, this perception comes under strain when faced with competing and now seemingly conflictual policy narratives from the great powers. While in 2013 almost 40% believed that cooperation between the EU and Russia/ECU was not only beneficial but also possible and practical, this number had decreased twofold (18%) by 2016. While the overwhelming majority (2/3) of the respondents support and approve of the government's current course of action and foreign policy, a majority (51%) feels that the partnership with Russia and the EEU would be a safer bet in times of crisis and uncertainty (a rise by 14% since 2013), which compares to the just 11% who would prefer expanding the partnership with the EU. Only a third believe that multi-vectored policy – the Golden Rule of Lukashenko's Presidency – is now at all implementable.

An acute and caustic sense of rivalry bordering on incompatibility between the EU and the EEU is starting to become internalised among the respondents. They have become increasingly divided on the prospects of possible cooperation and dialogue with both parties, which would make Belarus' conventional 'balancing' ever harder to implement. The society feels truly torn, with a third believing that the EU and the EEU approaches are too different to reconcile; another third being convinced that they are absolutely incompatible, and the remainder hoping for the prospect of inter-regional cooperation and open access to both trading blocs.

In addition to a growing sense of rivalry, there is also a tangible perception of overlapping competencies between the EU and the EEU emerging. If before there was a strong sense of differentiation and complementarity between the two great neighbours, from late 2013 onwards the EU-EEU nexus has come to be seen as increasingly irreconcilable. Notably, as our 2013 survey indicated, the EU's main competencies were seen as laying in the possession of 'know-how' with respect to economic development, trade, democracy and good governance; those of the EEU/ECU was seen as complementary and as able to deliver primarily on trade, tourism, energy and employment opportunities. Hence, cooperating with both powers was seen as cost-effective and essential for the survival of the Belarusian economy. The 2016 survey, however, revealed that both powers are now perceived as equally able (and thus competitive) of delivering the same benefits with respect to economic reform and trade, with the EEU favoured over the EU by a margin of almost three-to-one (65%:23%), and nearly by two-to-one when it comes to economic development (56%:33%). Furthermore, the benefits of cooperation with the EU seem to be restricted to trade and economic development only; the benefits of aligning with the EEU are seen as wider and more diverse, and include tourism (39% – often for recreational purposes), energy security (26%), employment/pension benefits (25%), and education (23%). In summary, the 2016 survey saw, in tangible terms, the rise of the cooperation dilemma for Belarus, which becomes ever more pronounced when juxtaposed with what respondents see as the most pressing issues for the country: living costs (37%) and employment/pension opportunities (20%). The market, to help satisfy those needs for now, clearly lies with the EEU. These differing and now almost binary associations in relation to the EU and the EEU are profound in their implications, especially for the EU's policy implementation and its sustainable dialogue with the country at the strategic level. The EU and the EEU are no longer seen as complementary projects; rather, they are increasingly perceived as overlapping and dichotomous – a trend that became observable as early as 2013. In light of the still strong pragmatic interest, the newly revised ENP needs to carefully recaibrate the format of its proposed engagement, to gain more traction with the country on sectoral issues (especially those related to health, food, pensions, and employment), and remain effective especially in terms of practical measures and instruments to help reinstate a sense of complementarity and congruence in the EU-Belarus-EEU cooperation.

## 4.2 How to make the EU approach more compatible?

Urgent measures are required to diffuse the growing disconnection in public perceptions and policy narratives concerning the prospects of cooperation between the EU and the EEU/Russia. The existing 'incompatibility' of choice between the two trading blocs causes a considerable security imbalance, which could negatively affect the fragile

domestic status quo in Belarus and the conflict-torn wider region, as the experience of Ukraine attests.

There is presently a wide array of opinions amongst the EU policy-makers and practitioners about how to attend to the issue of 'incompatibility' and, hence, the prospect of inter-regional cooperation between the trading blocs. The wider issue is to how to reset relations with Russia to make the EaP less conflictual and more beneficial for all parties concerned, to which the GSS and the revised ENP have not provided the answers.

This paper believes that while there may be different solutions to deal with these issues, they are at the same time intrinsically inter-linked and could offer a unique opportunity for reconciliation if carefully considered. This is particularly important if Russia continues to be a challenge for the EU (as the GSS anticipates). There are a number of ways to leverage EU relevance and credibility in the region: one is via continued enhancement of bilateral relations with each EEU member state, including Belarus; and the other is, as Bertelsmann's focus paper suggests, "to consider Putin seriously and pursue the idea of a free trade area between the Eurasian region and the EU. Such cooperation would dispel the fear that European trade policy is directed against Russia" (2016:9). Furthermore, the potential gains for all parties concerned could entail significant increases in real income, which in Belarus alone could grow by 4.9 per cent (Ibid:5), and positive inter-dependencies – and in this way contributing to forging resilience and bringing stability back to the region. This is particularly likely in light of the fact that 'a functioning market economy' has been identified as a top priority and 'shared value' by all parties involved.

Enhancing EU bilateral links with individual EEU member states is imperative, as it would empower them to realise their voice and exercise their right of veto if need be, across their respective regional structures. Hence, it is important that the EU continues to develop its structural relations with both Kazakhstan and Belarus especially, to ensure these two founding EEU partners have strong clout in the EEU.

Armenia, another EEU member with whom the EU is currently going through a scoping exercise for the purposes of developing a tailored framework agreement, may present a very important case-study for Belarus to consider. As one EU official noted: "We need to establish a framework where the competencies of the EEU and the objectives of the EU do not clash. We want to respect Armenia's obligations to the EEU, but at the same time promote the EU interests which include trade" (Kostanyan 2016).

Finally, if the EU were to advance its leverage over the region it would also have to recognise the EEU as a neighbouring regional bloc, with whom it needs to cooperate. As Bertelsmann's (2016) paper suggests, this would not only address the issues of strengthening and making the EEU more structurally sound by international standards. By extension, it would also help to resolve the conflict over Ukraine, and possibly even restore a constructive dialogue with Russia (ibid).

Inter-regional cooperation could bring substantial benefits, especially for the EEU and the neighbouring EU countries. This could have an even greater effect if conflict zones (Transnistria; Abkhazia, Ossetia, etc.) and other CIS states were co-opted into this trade cooperation initiative. The net effect, as Bertelsmann's paper argues, would be "of a magnitude that would represent a substantial impact on people's purchasing power, especially in the EEU states…" (Ibid:16). Furthermore, "a free trade area between the EU and the EEU has a considerable potential to deescalate tensions" (Ibid), and serve as a basis for making a greater Europe – from Lisbon to Vladivostok – a reality one day.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This analysis has examined Belarus' changing domestic and regional context, which, it has argued, now presents a range of new opportunities for developing the EU's dialogue with the country and the wider region. To make it more enduring, the EU needs to understand the geopolitical complexity of smaller states, and Belarus in particular. The following three tenets have been advanced to make the EU approach more effective, legitimate, and compatible with the country and the wider neighbourhood:

- The EU needs to recognise that Belarus, as a small state located between two larger neighbours, is keen to maintain cooperation with both, but on mutually agreeable terms – a 'balancing strategy'. As a small state, it would struggle to commit to binary opportunities, which could cause a security dilemma for the government and its people. Rather, Belarus is eager to remain agile and responsive to its external environment, and would prefer an interest-driven deep sectoral cooperation to a ubiquitous agreement on EU terms.
- Belarus, like every other state in the eastern region, is normatively different. While it increasingly perceives

the EU as an important strategic partner, it nevertheless sees it as different and almost opposite in terms of its identity and values. As practice shows, a more tailored and low-key technical engagement is more effective and preferable, especially if it is on a continuous basis, as it has a far greater socialising effect[29] with respect to international norms and standards, and consequently, a greater impact on behavioural patterns and expectations than any political conditionality. Hence, a wide-sectoral approach and cooperation would have more traction with the government, and in this way, could succeed in bringing about an 'inside-out' change.

- Finally, recognising and engaging with the EEU is imperative, for a number of reasons: not only would it empower and stabilise the EEU individual member states and socialise them in the norms of the international trade community; it would also make them more resilient and independent in the pursuit of their own interests, within the EEU, thus redressing existing security imbalances within the wider region. Furthermore, a better structured and more functional region would bring more stability and prosperity to its recipients, and could lead to the establishment of a new inter-regional dialogue and closer economic convergence between the EU and Russia in the long-term.

Recognising the above tenets is not about stating the obvious, but rather about ensuring a more inclusive and pragmatic approach from the EU, which could engender change and stability in the wider region.

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[29] Cross-temporal evidence of surveys conducted in 2013 and 2016 indicates a steadily growing positive appreciation of the EU as an important strategic partner for Belarus (http://kent.ac.uk/politics/gec/research/index/html) , which in large part could be attributed to the EU's continued low-key engagement with the country and the latter's exposure to the benefits of cooperation.

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## Appendix: Information about the surveys

The survey[30] examined the public attitudes of the Belarusian respondents towards the European Union (EU) and the Eurasian Customs/Economic Union (ECU/EEU). It was organised along three major blocs of questions:

- EU-Belarus relations: perceptions, interests and expectations
- Belarusian values and normative associations
- Geopolitics: Belarus between the EU and the ECU/EEU

This 2016 nation-wide representative survey was *cross-temporal,* undertaken with reference to the two analogous surveys conducted in 2009 and 2013 for comparative purposes.[31] The findings are comparable with the other available data, including the EU Neighbourhood Barometer East (Autumn 2012),[32] the IISEPS polls,[33] and Annual Survey Report: Belarus – 1st Wave (spring 2016).

The survey involved all six regions of Belarus, covering 52 selected residential areas. The sampling was multi-staged, stratified, and random, and included 1000 respondents (1643 contacts were attempted in total). The surveyed selection was representative of the population aged 18+ (urban and rural) by nationality, sex, region, age, and education. The interview lasted on average 40–50 minutes, using local languages for interlocution. The sample representation error was no more than ± 3%. The survey included 12% random quality control on completion, undertaken by the Principal Investigator. 81 interviewers were involved in undertaking the survey. They had on average 3–10 years of polling experience, and received relevant training in social research skills.

30 This survey was commissioned by the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) and Global Europe Centre/Jean Monnet Chair. The findings are the copyright of the University of Kent: Please cite accordingly.

31 The first nation-wide survey was conducted in 2008–9 as part of a large ESRC project (ESRC 061-25-0005) titled 'Europeanising or Securitising the outsiders: Assessing the EU's partnership-building approach to the neighbours' (2008–11) – for more information see: http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders/ The second was commissioned by the ODB in 2013 and deployed the same questionnaire for comparative purposes. Its results are available at http://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/gec/research/documents/gec-belarus-survey-brief-2013.pdf.

32 http://www.enpi-info.eu/maineast.php?id=777&id_type=9&lang_id=450

33 http://www.iiseps.org/?page_id=1349