

FOREIGN POLICY

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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND BELARUS IN 2004–2012: CONTRIBUTION OF LITHUANIA

INTRODUCTION

FOR MANY YEARS THE EUROPEAN UNION had not deemed it necessary to define its relations with the problematic Eastern neighbours, especially with Belarus, an object of an official isolationist policy. However, after the expansion of 2004 with Lithuania gaining full membership of the EU, the latter became an immediate neighbour of Belarus, which evidently brought to the fore a previously somewhat suppressed need to make the democratic European values “attractive” to Belarus. With the bilateral tension between Russia and Belarus rising, the government of Belarus intensified its relations with the EU in 2008. In 2010, a new crisis emerged in the EU-Belarus relations and in the first half of 2012 the relations reached an unprecedented tension. Subsequently, the EU members demonstrated unanimity and temporarily called off all their ambassadors from Minsk. In November 2013, at the time of Lithuanian presidency of the Council of the EU, the third Eastern Partnership Summit will be held in Vilnius, however, it is unlikely that the top representatives of the Belarusian government will be invited to attend it.

The aim of the paper is to analyse and evaluate the role of Lithuania in the European Union’s foreign policy towards Belarus from 2004 to 2012. A pressing need for a discussion of this matter emerges in an attempt to answer the following questions: what kind of policy, aimed at fostering democratic processes in Belarus, is adopted by the EU and whether it is effective. Thus, the present paper examines the role of Lithuania in this process specifically as that of a country, among a few others, interested most of all in the stability of the region and the democratisation of Belarus. Moreover, with the forthcoming Lithuanian presidency of the Council of the EU it is important to analyse the relations between the EU, Lithuania and Belarus and assess the results of the cooperation.

In order to confirm or refute prevailing opinions, especially regarding bilateral relations between Lithuania and Belarus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Audronius Ažubalis, the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, dr. Victor Šadurski, the Dean of the International Relations Faculty of Belarusian State University, and Kaciaryna Radžko, the representative of Belarus office of the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

THE NORMATIVE POWER OF THE EU AND EASTERN PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

The EU foreign policy is a significantly more complex process than exclusive national policies developed by individual countries. It cannot be defined by a single theory of international relations or European integration since no such theory alone can explain all the processes involved. The supranational institutions are influenced by national interests of member-states and, conversely, have an effect on member states. One of the leading researchers of the European political integration Federiga Bindi maintains that even a progressive EU foreign policy cannot be subject to assessments based on the terminology of national foreign policies. On the other hand, she acknowledges the fact that the EU is able to carry out its foreign policy. However, leaders of the EU member states often refrain from the use of such terminology and are reluctant to recognise such policy in fear that it might diminish their influence in the public sphere (Bindi, 2010: 339-348). It is important to realise that the EU is not an independently operating political unit with respective military resources and national interests. It functions under an obligation of its nation states and represents only a limited range of interests, delegated to it by its member states. In other words, the EU represents only common interests of its member states in its relations with the outside world.

The EU adopts the policy of conditionality in its cooperation with other countries, especially, the ones that are economically and politically weaker (Shapovalova and Boonstra, 2010). The EU tends to build its cooperation on the principle of a partner country fulfilling its conditions followed by rewards given in return. In her criticism of the policy under discussion, F. Bindi states that *“the link between conditions and rewards is very unclear. From the official documents, it is unclear which conditions need to be fulfilled in order to obtain a specific reward. Overall the Action Plans read like a wish list of the EU, with the EU amply stipulating detailed conditions with only a limited number of vague and uncertain rewards in return”* (Bindi, 2010: 108). Importantly, from all the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership programme only Belarus has not signed the *Action Plan* with the EU.

The normative power of the EU can be viewed in relation to the process of Europeanisation which is becoming more evident and of an increasing interest among researchers. Europeanisation is regarded as an incorporation of commonly shared rules, norms, practices and definitions into the internal policy structures of nation states (Börzel, 2010: 7). As we will further observe, a great variety of opinions and interests impairs the EU's capacity to pursue normative policy due to inconsistencies present in the policy of defining conditions and differences in the ways human rights and democracy standards are applied.

In the context of Europeanisation, the influence of the EU on a non-union state is most often analysed on the basis of five factors (see Table 1). If the factors of Europeanisation were applied in Belarus case, the cost of adaptation would mean nothing else but the end of A. Lukashenka's regime. It would take only a few steps towards democratisation of the country's social, economic and political life not only *de jure* but *de facto* for the conditions sustaining the authoritarian regime to gradually disappear. It is likely that by pursuing Neighbourhood Policy initiatives the EU attempts to provide this rhetorical

structure with a material basis although it can only yield results in the long term. Since the object of this paper is connected with Belarus, we deem it necessary to analyse the Eastern Partnership initiative.

TABLE 1

Five Factors Affecting a Non-EU Country in the Context of Europeanisation

First	"adaptation costs in an attempt to align the country's internal situation with the EU requirements"
Second	"external pressure by the EU on the chosen country"
Third	"the country's capacity for reciprocity in terms of meeting the EU requirements"
Fourth	"the country's willingness to co-operate"
Fifth	"the country's capacity to withstand the pressure exerted by the EU"

Source: Börzel, 2010.

The Eastern Partnership presented as a joint initiative by Sweden and Poland was approved on 9 May 2009 at the EU summit in Prague. The Commission foresees that "*the level of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership will depend on the overall development of EU–Belarus relations*" (EU Press Releases, 2008). The intention is to allocate €600m in 2010–2013 for the programme implementation support. Probably the most important aspect of the Eastern Partnership lies in the fact that there is no common consensus in the European Union with regard to the prospects and implementation of this initiative. While many Eastern member states of the EU back a potential accession of Eastern Partnership countries to the EU, the large EU states are categorically against such future developments. For example, France took a negative view of Poland's consent to support the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership on the condition that a similar initiative is created for the Eastern neighbours of the EU.

Euronest Parliamentary Assembly. In order to encourage co-operation among countries on the parliamentary level, an EU–Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly was established (it consists of 60 members of the EU Parliament and, respectively, ten members from every Eastern Partnership country). Its main goal is to oversee that democratic control is maintained in the Eastern Partnership countries. *Euronest* PA was to be launched in 2009, however, due to discussions brought about by the issue of participation of Belarus in the initiative, its constituent meeting took place only in the spring of 2011. The Parliament of the EU has not recognised the Parliament of Belarus as a democratically elected representative of the nation, hence, Belarus has not been allowed to participate in the initiative on equal legal terms.

Civil Society Forum. With the aim of engaging civil society and non-governmental organisations in the promotion of democratic reforms, the Civil Society Forum was established as a platform for discussions and submission of recommendations. Civil society is an instrumental factor in the formation of inputs that animate political processes (Shapovalova and Boonstra, 2010: 7). Conversely, the Civil Society Forum cannot be considered as an initiative of great importance due to limitations of its resources.

EU–BELARUS RELATIONS

In 2005 the General Affairs and External Relations Council (hereafter – the Council) announced that the EU will strive to communicate and demonstrate the advantages of Neighbourhood Policy to Belarusians (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2005: 308). Shortly after that the European Commission presented a non-paper, “What the European Union could bring to Belarus”. However, it did not generate any response from Belarus. In the beginning of 2006, following the elections which failed to meet democratic standards, the Council deemed it necessary to impose additional sanctions on Belarus.

With the bilateral tension between Russia and Belarus rising, the government of Belarus intensified its relations with the EU in 2008. According to analysts “*in such a context a dilemma had to be faced, since co-operation with Minsk meant making concessions (or at least turning a blind eye) about the situation in the fields of democracy, the rule of law and human rights*” (Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 2010: 5). Even though in September the Council noted that the parliamentary elections in Belarus did not meet the OSCE criteria, yet it emphasised the progress made during the election campaign (Council of the European Union, 2008). After a short time, hoping to open a dialogue with Belarus, the EU suspended a travel ban on A. Lukashenka and other 31 representatives of the Belarusian government. In 2009 the Council welcomed a high level bilateral dialogue, technical co-operation and the willingness of Belarus to participate in the Eastern Partnership (Council of the European Union, 2009). However, after the presidential election of December 2010 the relations saw a dramatic change: the criticism of human rights violations became stronger again and the suspension of travel ban was recalled.

In February 2011 the Council extended a mandate to the Commission in negotiations with Belarus regarding simplified procedures for issuing visas and the readmission agreement. The invitation was valid until June, however, Belarus did not express any willingness to start negotiations. It has local arrangements regarding border crossing with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, but the only country of the above that the Parliament of Belarus had concluded an agreement with is Latvia (Delegation of the European Union, 2012).

2012 was a year of unprecedented events in the EU–Belarus relations. In the beginning of the year the EU decided to include twenty one more individuals into the EU *persona non-grata* list and freeze their assets (currently the list amounts up to 250 people and business companies closely tied to the Government of Belarus (Council of the European Union, 2012)). Immediately, the Government of Belarus announced that it had recalled its Permanent Representative to the European Union and the Ambassador of Belarus to Poland for consultations in Minsk. It also presented the Head of the EU Delegation in Belarus and the Ambassador of Poland with proposals to leave the country for consultations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, 2012a). In her announcement as a reaction to such steps taken by Minsk, Catherine Ashton declared that the EU member states would act unanimously and recall all their ambassadors from Minsk (Council of the European Union, 2012a).

The Government of Belarus made an official statement indicating that sanctions and one-sided requirements only move the prospects of normalising bi-

lateral relations further away as European politicians are “*captured by the conflict thinking (and) they remain hostages of the coercion and blackmail logic*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, 2012b). Strict rhetoric aside, purposeful sanctions seemed to have had an effect on A. Lukashenka as he had pardoned and released from prison Andrej Sannikaŭ, the main opponent to A. Lukashenka in the presidential election of 2010. Soon after this event the EU member states returned their ambassadors to Minsk. In the meantime Catherine Ashton made a statement that the release of all political prisoners constitutes a necessary condition for further constructive co-operation.

As Liudas Mažylis maintains, depending on circumstances the European Union can easily change the course of its foreign policy towards Belarus since it lacks a long-term strategy and does not have concrete instruments to exert an impact on Belarus (Mažylis, 2010: 88). The EU is constantly increasing its *persona non-grata* list and in its relations with Belarus employs an *ad hoc* principle by adopting the policy of isolationism as soon as Belarus fails to meet the expectations of the EU. Alternatively, the EU reduces the severity of sanctions when it hopes to open a dialogue. Even though co-operation between the EU and Belarus is not stuck in stagnation, an inconsistent policy and periodical shifts in the pattern of improvement/deterioration of relations does not offer any future prospects.

Funding and Support of NGOs. With a common EU border stretching for more than 1000 km, Belarus stands out as an important entity in terms of ensuring security in the east of the European Union. A study ordered by the European Commission revealed that economically and politically less developed neighbours of the EU constitute a risk of the rise of corruption in the EU member states (Centre for the Study of Democracy, 2010: 127). Objective doubts experienced by the EU states and apprehended well by A. Lukashenka serve as a tool of manipulation for him with a view of gaining more financial advantages for Belarus.

In an attempt to identify the level of importance of financial assignation for Belarus, the following details appear crucial from 2004 to 2006 under the TACIS programme allocations amounted only to €10m, whereas, for the entire period (1991-2006) only €77,5m was allocated. By comparison, the Ukraine received €998,3m (European Commission, 2007: 2). However, in recent years the financial support granted by the EU to Belarus has significantly increased: over the period of 2007–2011 Belarus received €43,07m. Under the ENPI programme from 2012 to 2013 the financial support amounted to €28,5m.

In 2011 the EU made a decision to increase the financial support by four times up to €19.3m for the period of 2011–2013 to be allocated exclusively on the initiatives of civil society in Belarus. Later funds granted specifically for the development of civil society were increased not by four but six times, resulting in the allocated amount of €13,6m in 2011 and in 2012 – €12,7m (European Commission, 2013). The amounts indicated above make up only a part of funding since support is also provided through *EIDHR*, *Erasmus Mundus* and NGO grant instruments.

Although Belarus formally participates in the Eastern Partnership policy, on the official level it is actually disengaged from any initiatives of this policy.

Belarus decided not to participate at all at the Eastern Partnership country meeting in September of 2011 in Warsaw. A. Lukashenka stated that this initiative was nothing more but “empty talk” because it limited itself only to a discussion of “providing education on politics and diplomacy” as far as Belarus is concerned (Interfax-Ukraine, 2011). Belarus is the only country in the Eastern Partnership which has not signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. In the *Euronest* Parliamentary Assembly, which took place in Azerbaijan, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle ensured that regardless of the failure of Belarus to join this initiative, the EU will continue to strengthen its ties with the civil society in the country (EU Press Releases, 2012).

The opposition of Belarus remains divided before every election. A seemingly chaotic political split has deeper causes. Such disagreement among Belarus opposition is partially caused by the key supporter of pro-democratic power in the country – the European Union. It has no concrete strategy regarding the ways of support and development of civil society in Belarus. In addition, it encourages competition among opposition groups for EU grants. Conversely, EIDHR, which operates through decentralised co-operation, is probably one of the most important tools of the European institutions in providing financial aid for the activities of public organisations. This initiative allows for help to be provided directly to civil society and independent media as programmes under this initiative do not require approval of the Belarusian government. Another important factor is that EIDHR also facilitates in allocating funds to civil society organisations not officially registered in Belarus and their support through entities registered and functioning outside of Belarus, for example, in Lithuania or Poland (Tapiola, 2006: 68).

NGOs criticise allocation mechanisms of the EU financial support for their bureaucratic burden and highly extensive audit procedures, which increase programme costs. The EU procedures are not conducive to making grant requests and a large amount of funds is spent on grant administration rather than causes intended, which results in organisations applying for other, less bureaucratic funds, for example, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (Raik, 2006: 44). The EU hopes that the opposition will be able to mobilise the part of society which is informed by the West. As the analyst of the *European Policy Centre* Rosa Balfour believes, granting funds to support opposition groups and organisations in the hope of them forming a counterbalance to the authoritarian regime is naive on the part of the EU (Balfour and Missiroli, 2007: 23). The EU is gradually increasing allocations but it has not developed a strategy yet on the distribution of funds which would yield tangible results.

Economic Cooperation. An attempt at identifying the value of Belarus to the EU in terms of energy brings Russia’s energy reserves into discussion. Certainly not all the countries of the EU import gas or oil from Russia, therefore, the Belarus factor is of minor significance to such countries as Ireland, Spain, Denmark, etc. Alternatively, it is evident that Germany, a major importer of Russian energy resources, is the most active among the large EU member states as far as the Belarus issue is concerned.

Nord Stream gas pipeline was not beneficial for Belarus as it reduced to the minimum the relevance of the infrastructure of the strategic gas supply com-

pany *Beltransgaz*. Belarus was forced to sell this state company to the Russian company *Gazprom* but according to Viktor Šadurski (2011) it was a logical decision since reduced gas prices for Belarus would in the end help create an environment conducive to the stability of A. Lukashenka's rule.

A. Lukashenka pursues the policy of foreign trade diversification. Belarus seeks to reduce dependency on Russia and to ensure a large portion of export to other countries of the Newly Independent States, China, Latin America and the EU. Incidentally, the textile sector of Belarus faces one of the most restrictive EU trade regimes (Dura, 2008: 2). As noted earlier, the European Union applies sanctions of visa ban, financial assets freeze and trade restrictions to A. Lukashenka and persons close to him. They are applied in such a fashion so as not to affect lives of ordinary people. Aimed at business entities, they are realistically of little use. Quite a number of Belarusian companies are registered in Russia, hence, they are unaffected by the sanctions as they belong to the Russian jurisdiction.

Transportation of goods in the EU foreign trade system through the territory of Belarus is quite an important factor. More than 100m tons of goods per year are transported through the territory of Belarus. 90% of them are exported to Russia and imported from it. In its relations with the EU, Belarus gives priority to partnership development in trade and investment, transportation and transit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, 2012c). To put it another way, the EU and Belarus reach the strongest political consensus in the economic and energy sectors. As a result, more intense pressure is placed by business sector on the governments of the Eastern member states of the EU to keep better relations with Belarus.

Belarus is a complicated neighbour, therefore, policy towards it should be carefully considered in bilateral negotiations because of its strong willingness to negotiate on equal basis. As Aliaksej Pikulik notes, the European Union actually attempts only to soften Lukashenka's policy towards itself and the civilians of Belarus but not change it (Pikulik, 2010: 6). Evidently, the EU has to improve a dysfunctional conditionality policy towards Belarus. The most effective way to achieve this aim is to sign the currently suspended Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which could lead to further negotiations on the inclusion of Belarus into the Eastern Partnership. However, inclusion without consistent political reforms would create a dangerous precedent (Jarabik, 2009).

A PRIORITY SHIFT IN THE LITHUANIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS IN 2004–2012

According to Evaldas Nekrašas, *“over the last decade in the EU and not only there the Lithuanian foreign policy has been referred to in a caustic manner as “one issue policy”. This issue, of course, is the issue of Russia”* (Nekrašas, 2009: 132). In the meantime, as far as Belarus is concerned it is obvious that Lithuania has maintained much better relations with it than other EU countries and such policy has yielded both pragmatic and political bonuses.

From 2004 to 2006 the programme for Government of the Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas included an aim to *“support Belarus in their efforts*

to strengthen independence, democracy and civil society; foster good neighbour relations <...>, establish Lithuania as an expert on the European Neighbourhood Policy" (Parliament of Lithuania, 2004). The document states that free trade agreements with Belarus will be sought. Incidentally, the following fourteenth Government programme has no mention of Belarus even though the majority of foreign policy aims were taken from the thirteenth Government (Parliament of Lithuania, 2006). In Andrius Kubilius government programme support for Belarus is foreseen on one condition, i.e., Belarus should put efforts in adhering to democratic values. The latter Government devoted the biggest attention to Belarus in its programme by comparison with the Governments of A. Brazauskas and G. Kirkilas.

The sixteenth Government (of Algirdas Butkevičius) programme states that Lithuania will actively support democratic initiatives and the creation of an environment conducive to civil society in Belarus. In addition, it ensures support for integration of Belarus into the "European structures proportionally to the efforts made by the Belarusian government in approaching the standards of the European democracy" (Parliament of Lithuania, 2012). The programme foresees that a lot of attention will be devoted to the increase of transit cargo to be transported by *Lietuvos geležinkeliai* (Lithuanian railways) in cooperation with the NIS countries and, first of all, Belarus.

In spring of 2007 Prime Minister G. Kirkilas mentioned to foreign media about Lukašenka's "exit strategy". He criticised the president of Belarus and expressed a view that democratisation of Belarus would be beneficial to Lithuania in all aspects (Lietuvos rytas, 2007). Interestingly, Kirkilas regarded democratisation of the neighbouring country only in the case of Lukashenka leaving the presidential post. In autumn of 2008, with the tenure coming to an end and the issue of a nuclear power plant to be built by Belarus within a few dozen kilometres from Vilnius causing alert, Kirkilas claimed that Belarus could do as it pleases within its territory and, generally, paid little heed to the issue of construction of this plant (Lietuvos rytas, 2008). In the meantime, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the fifteenth Government Audronius Ažubalis was more categorical. In an interview taken by the authors of this paper he observed that intentions to build any nuclear power plants on the border with Lithuania are nothing else but "*political projects of Russia*" (Ažubalis, 2012).

The evaluation of programmes for Governments of A. Brazauskas, G. Kirkilas and A. Kubilius reveals that even though centre left parties emphasised the importance of economic cooperation, yet they criticised the Belarusian government for the lack of democratic reforms. A. Kubilius Government programme focuses on the value-based relations with Belarus, however, it actually aims at creating better conditions for businesses with the Lithuanian capital in the neighbouring country. It is still early to evaluate practical results of the cooperation with Belarus as it is provided for in Algirdas Butkevičius Government programme, although it is likely that rather pragmatic relations will be kept. President Valdas Adamkus noted on numerous occasions that a dialogue with neighbours has to be built on shared principles and values (President of Lithuania, 2008). In the meantime, the view of relations with neighbours held by Dalia Grybauskaitė leans more towards the representation of Lithuania's

pragmatic interests. In an interview given to a weekly *Veidas* the President claimed: *"Whenever I refer to a pragmatic policy towards Belarus or Russia I do not mean specific joint projects. The most important thing is the common background, the dialogue between two sides and the economic and cultural co-operation at least. Whereas, political cooperation will depend on other circumstances"* (Office of the President of Lithuania, 2011a).

According to V. Adamkus, earlier Lithuania used to receive criticism about its overactive participation in democratisation processes of Eastern Europe but now Lithuania can be criticised for a complete failure to address the issues of Eastern Europe (Lietuvos Rytas, 2011). To put it differently, the President is worried about the change in the direction of the foreign policy since promotion of democratic processes in Eastern Europe is clearly not a priority during the presidential rule of D. Grybauskaitė.

In September of 2009 D. Grybauskaitė met with A. Lukashenka in Vilnius. During the meeting the President paid a lot of attention to economic cooperation and also expressed official criticism by stating that Lithuania supports the EU position with regard to the development of democracy in Belarus (Office of the President of Lithuania, 2009). After the meeting A. Lukashenka praised constructive dialogue and said that *"Lithuania cannot dictate to us (Belarus) and it has not dictated any preliminary conditions unlike some other countries"* (Lukashenka, 2009). When a year passed after the meeting, D. Grybauskaitė visited Minsk and urged Belarus to organise the coming presidential elections of 2010 so that they would conform to the international standards. In the latter meeting a bilateral agreement was signed (but not ratified) on a simplified procedure of border crossing along the 50 km zone for the Belarusian and Lithuanian residents living on both sides of the border.

Shortly after the presidential elections of 2010 in Belarus (which failed to meet the OSCE requirements) Dalia Grybauskaitė addressed the President of the European Council H. Van Rompuy and the President of the European Commission J. M. Barroso, urging them to facilitate the movement of Belarusians in the Schengen Area as soon as possible and not identify this issue with a possibility of sanctions after the undemocratic elections (Office of the President of Lithuania, 2011b).

Strategic directions of the Lithuanian policy for the European Union from 2008 to 2013 contain an objective to *"seek closer EU cooperation with the Eastern neighbours of the EU by transgressing the boundaries of the European Neighbourhood Policy"* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, 2013). In an interview to a Belarusian daily the President emphasised that the Eastern Partnership policy *"is of a more symbolic, political, but not so much practical nature. Europe opens up to Belarus, starts placing trust in it and wishes to encourage cooperation"* (Office of the President of Lithuania, 2010).

In cooperation development with Belarus Valdas Adamkus and Dalia Grybauskaitė used different approaches and priorities. In an effort to steer Belarus towards democratisation V. Adamkus accentuated cooperation based on shared values, whilst D. Grybauskaitė has pursued a more pragmatic policy and proposed to A. Lukashenka a model of economic cooperation in mutually important sectors. It is hard to envisage President Adamkus visiting undemo-

cratic Belarus, whereas Dalia Grybauskaitė has already met with A. Lukashenka twice over her five-year presidential cycle.

BELARUS–LITHUANIA RELATIONS

In June of 2011 Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that Belarus relations with neighbours are good (with the exception of Poland). He also added that Lithuania is an EU member, therefore, the majority of political decisions with regard to Belarus are stipulated by Brussels in the common EU positions, which, in turn, puts Lithuania in a position *“whereby whether it likes it or not, it has to criticise Belarus”* (President of Belarus, 2011). After the EU countries called off their ambassadors from Minsk, Lukashenka pointed out that they will find it difficult to return because every country will be regarded individually by Belarus. Lukashenka stated in the same announcement that Lithuania and Latvia were experiencing immense pressure from the EU about the sanctions which allowed for understanding that ambassadors of these countries are always welcome in Belarus (Europe Direct, 2012). Conversely, former Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Audronius Ažubalis maintains that Lithuania does not aim to stand out in the whole EU policy with regard to Belarus since the European Union policy matches Lithuania’s national interests (Ažubalis, 2012).

Belarus willingly participates in the Cooperation Across Borders since it is of technical nature, widens the infrastructure and does not oblige Belarus to seek political reforms in the country. As per the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, specifically *“thanks to Lithuanian efforts the European Union showed a political will to seek negotiations regarding simplified procedures of visa regime for Belarusian citizens”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, 2012: 16). Lithuania has ratified a bilateral agreement on a simplified procedure of border crossing for borderland residents of Lithuania and Belarus (50 km in both directions across the frontier), whilst Belarus, having criticised Lithuania about delays in signing the agreement (Interfax, 2011), now keeps avoiding to ratify the agreement which was signed back in 2010 during D. Grybauskaitė’s visit to Belarus. Lithuania has informed Belarus via an additional note that it is ready to adhere to the provisions of the agreement on simplified border crossing. In the meantime, Latvia and Belarus have already enjoyed the so called small visa free regime for people residing (30 km in both directions) in the borderland areas since February 2012.

Lithuania is probably the main foreign headquarters of Belarusian pro-democratic NGOs. The Belarus office of the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation is based in the country as it cannot operate in Minsk due to political reasons. In 2011 in Vilnius the *House of United Belarus (HUB Vilnius)* and the *Freedom House* agencies were founded. There is an increasing number of American NGOs (International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute) moving their activities from other countries of the region to Lithuania. Internet website *Charter 97*, which is under persecution for its activities in Belarus, was also registered in Vilnius (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, 2012: 15). In her interview Kaciaryna Radźko, the representative of Konrad Adenauer Foundation, pointed out that Europe has an obligation to be accessible to ac-

tive individuals from the academic field (Radzko, 2012). As far as this sphere is concerned, Lithuania is believed to be one of the most advanced countries. The most successful project is considered to be the European Humanities University, which moved to Vilnius after it was forced to terminate its activities in Belarus in summer of 2004.

In 2011 all the efforts of Lithuania were washed away by data supply to the Belarusian governmental structures about financial operations of the opposition's representative Alieš Bialiacki. As it appeared later, the same had been performed by Poland too, hence, it was a great pretext for Belarus to sentence a staunch critic of Lukashenka. Such an unprecedented event is referred to by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lithuanian Republic as an illegal and "very painful diversion of undemocratic powers" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, 2012: 15). When this mistake was revealed, the state undertook all possible measures to mitigate the situation: a political asylum was offered to A. Bialiacki (which he refused), his family and the *Viasna* Human Rights Centre are receiving support. For the funding of the former, A. Bialiacki had opened accounts both in Lithuania and Poland.

The "teddy bear scandal" is worth mentioning too. In summer of 2012 a small civil aeroplane manned by Swedish citizens flew from the Lithuanian territory into the Belarusian air space without being noticed by the Lithuanian border guards and air defence services. The Swedish pilots unloaded teddy bears over the Belarusian territory filled with democratic slogans and returned to Lithuania and then Sweden. Whilst the responsible Lithuanian institutions were trying to put blame for incompetence on one another, A. Lukashenka spoke of threats leading to painful consequences for the Lithuanian economic sector.

Economic cooperation. Belarus is one of the most important trade partners for Lithuania. It is under number eight in the Lithuanian export path list and under number ten amongst import partners (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, 2012). During the period under discussion Lithuanian trade balance with Belarus was always positive. It shows that Lithuania exports more goods to Belarus than imports from it. In 2012 Lithuanian export to Belarus amounted to €1058,53m. Whereas in 2011 export to Belarus was slightly lower – €1044,54m, however, in comparison with 2010, it grew by approximately 27 per cent. In 2011 Lithuanian export to Belarus made up 5,17 per cent of the gross Lithuanian exports (in 2005 it amounted to 3,25 per cent, whilst in 2008 it reached 4,5 per cent). Such data indicates that Lithuanian and Belarusian trade relations are growing one-sidedly and becoming more intensive. Direct investment in Belarus by Lithuania is barely bigger than respective investment in Lithuania. The tendencies of growth of direct Lithuanian investment abroad allow for a conclusion that Belarus is an attractive country for Lithuanian investors.

In 2011 almost 3,3 billion m³ of gas was consumed in Lithuania (Lithuanian Ministry of Energy, 2013). Importantly, all the gas used in Lithuania is imported from Russia. The biggest part of it is transported through Belarus, therefore, Lithuania is dependent not only on the gas supplier but the carrier too. The Belarusian Strategy on Energy Capacity Development indicates that the country does not have an infrastructure of transportation independent from *Gazprom*, thus, Belarus aims at diversification of the import of energy reserves.

As a way of achieving this aim, the country welcomes a possibility to support the construction of a liquid gas terminal in Lithuania. However, when asked whether a possibility to include Belarus into the construction of a liquid gas terminal was considered, Audronius Ažubalis replied that the main objective of Lithuania is to build the terminal as fast as possible, while the involvement of another partner would mean project delays (Ažubalis, 2012).

The aforementioned Strategy on Energy Capacity Development indicates that in order to meet the growing need for electricity, two nuclear reactors have to be built by 2020 whose capacity would be 2340 MW. Belarus signed an agreement with Russia in October 2011 on the construction of the nuclear power plant in Astraviec region and has already completed the preparatory stage of the project. The first reactor of the plant is to be launched in 2017. This project by Belarus raises a grave concern to Lithuania since the power plant will be located at a distance of only 20 km from the Lithuanian border and 50 km from Vilnius. Lithuania has not been presented yet with the environment risk assessment. In A. Ažubalis' opinion, both the nuclear power plant in Kaliningrad and the one in Astraviec serve one aim, i.e., *"To generate turmoil in the region and put off potential investors from the Visaginas nuclear power plant"* (Ažubalis, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The EU has reached the highest level of integration in the economic field and is using this advantage in its attempt to fulfil the aims of its foreign policy. Pragmatic interests of nation states can be observed behind officially declared values. Probably the most important aspect in the EU Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership lies in the fact that the EU countries lack deeper consensus over the implementation and perspectives of these policies. An inconsistent policy in the EU–Belarus relations and periodical shifts in their improvement/deterioration pattern suggest a conclusion that conditionality policy has not brought forth a tangible progress yet and its prospects still remain unclear. Moreover, the EU evidently applies an *ad hoc* principle and is as much in need of a specific strategy leading to a constructive dialogue with Belarus, as it is of a unanimous agreement on both, granting funds to the groups of opposition, and formation of civil society. The conditionality policy of the EU lays down requirements clearly, however, a reciprocal action for their fulfilment remains unidentified. Another important aspect is the financial support to NGOs: the latter criticise grant allocation mechanisms of the EU because of their bureaucratic burden and the obligatory, extensive, and complicated reports. The EU is gradually increasing its grant funds but it does not have any strategy as to how these funds should be distributed to ensure that tangible results are achieved.

The EU membership obliged Lithuania to adhere to common EU positions with regard to foreign policy issues, however, they do not always correspond with its economic interests. As the Lithuanian export to Belarus grows, foreign policy makers face an increasingly challenging dilemma: whilst demonstrating solidarity with the common position of the European Union and sanctions applied to Belarus, how not to impair bilateral trade relations. Lithuania and

Belarus have always maintained better relations than other countries of the EU. Nevertheless, the policy towards Belarus is not consistent and is subject to change depending on Lithuanian policy makers. Lithuanian foreign policy priorities with regard to Belarus differed in the presidential tenures of Valdas Adamkus and Dalia Grybauskaitė. Certainly, the main objective is the same – the independent and democratic Belarus, but visions of how to reach this objective are different. Valdas Adamkus placed emphasis on the co-operation based on shared values whilst D. Grybauskaitė pursues a more pragmatic policy and seeks to engage Belarus in a mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

Lithuania solidarises with the interests of the EU in policy towards Belarus but it also has a reserved space for exclusive national interests. Lithuania and Belarus have always enjoyed rather good bilateral relations (if compared with relations between Minsk and the countries of Western Europe). Thus, during the thaw of EU–Belarus relations Lithuania undertook the role of a contact state between Minsk and Brussels. It is expedient for Lithuania to seek recognition from Belarus as a special partner in the European Union. Currently Lithuania is not interested in the efficiency of the EU sanctions on Belarus so that it could manoeuvre more independently in its foreign policy towards its neighbour. Alternatively, in a long-term perspective Lithuania would enjoy many more benefits if economic and political stability would be ensured in the region, hence, democratisation of Belarus remains one of the most important priorities in Eastern Europe.

The third party influence on the fulfilment of the Eastern Partnership initiative has not been researched extensively, thus, a further study of this subject would help create a more thorough and global vision. Belarus experiences significant leverage from Russia, hence, an assumption can be made that the democratisation of Belarus correlates with that of Russia.

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