

МІЖНАРОДНІ ВІДНОСИНИ: ЕТАПИ, ПРОЦЕСИ, ВИКЛИКИ

Історико-політичні проблеми сучасного світу:
Збірник наукових статей. – Чернівці:
Чернівецький національний університет,
2024. – Т. 50. – С. 57-68
DOI: 10.31861/mhpi2024.50.57-68

Modern Historical and Political Issues:
Journal in Historical & Political Sciences. – Chernivtsi:
Chernivtsi National University,
2024. – Volume. 50. – pp. 57-68
DOI: 10.31861/mhpi2024.50.57-68

УДК 327.8:338.24:32(4:476)

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Balancing Economic Interests and Political Norms: The EU-Belarus Relations through the Perspective of Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes

The article explores the changing cooperation framework between the European Union and Belarus (1994-2022), particularly emphasising cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs. It examines the different motivations of each partner: the EU's dedication to promoting normative values and democratic standards, contrasted with Belarus's more pragmatic approach focused on economic benefits and its strategic position between the EU and Russia. Utilising a mixed-methods approach that includes public opinion surveys, program evaluation reports, and recent anonymous in-depth interviews from 2024, the study reveals the complex reasons behind Belarus's ongoing involvement in CBC programs.

The results indicate that, despite facing significant political and geopolitical challenges, CBC initiatives notably impact Belarus's socioeconomic landscape. Even with the restrictive political climate and the intricate relationships among Belarus, the EU, and Russia, these programs offer a pathway for regional development and mutual advantage. The study concludes that while the EU's normative goals may face obstacles, CBC programs promote cross-border unity and improve regional stability.

Keywords: the EU, Belarus, cross-border cooperation, normative power, rational choice theory.

Балансування між економічними інтересами та політичними нормами: відносини між ЄС та Білоруссю крізь призму Програм транскордонного співробітництва

У статті досліджено характер співпраці між Європейським Союзом та Білоруссю (1994-2022), зокрема роль транскордонних програм співробітництва (ТКС) у цих взаємовідносинах. Автор аналізує розбіжності у мотиваціях сторін: прагнення ЄС просувати нормативні цінності, такі як демократія, права людини та верховенство права, протиставляється прагматичному підходу Білорусі, яка орієнтується на економічні вигоди та стратегічний баланс між ЄС і Росією. Використовуючи змішану методологію, що включає аналіз документів, опитування громадської думки та глибинні анонімні інтерв'ю, дослідження демонструє, що програми ТКС мають значний соціально-економічний вплив навіть за умов складного політичного клімату.

У роботі акцентується увага на тому, як програми ТКС сприяли економічному розвитку та посиленню регіональної співпраці, водночас забезпечуючи впровадження деяких європейських стандартів у Білорусі. Автор відзначає, що попри неоавторитарний характер білоруського режиму, ці програми були каналом для поширення європейських цінностей серед місцевого населення. Особливо наголошується на важливості проектів, які були спрямовані на інфраструктурний розвиток, захист довкілля, підвищення мобільності населення та економічної інтеграції.

Результати дослідження демонструють, що участь Білорусі у програмах ТКС була результатом раціонального вибору: з одного боку, країна отримувала значні економічні ресурси, з іншого – створила імідж частково співпрацюючого партнера, не впроваджуючи значних

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політичних реформ. Проте, незважаючи на політичні обмеження, ці програми сприяли локальному економічному зростанню та покращенню соціальних умов у прикордонних регіонах.

Автор дійшов висновку, що програми ТКС, хоч і обмежені в політичному впливі, створили підґрунтя для майбутньої демократизації та глибокої інтеграції Білорусі до європейського простору після ліквідації режиму Лукашенко. У статті також відзначено ключові виклики, пов'язані із припиненням фінансування програм через геополітичну напругу, зокрема підтримку Білоруссю російської агресії. Незважаючи на це, досвід реалізації програм ТКС залишається цінним прикладом успішного соціально-економічного співробітництва за умов політичних обмежень.

Ключові слова: Європейський Союз, Білорусь, транскордонне співробітництво, нормативна влада, теорія раціонального вибору.

Setting a scientific problem and its significance

The European Union's external relations significantly influence its foreign policy, particularly concerning Eastern European neighbours such as Belarus. Located at a strategic geographic junction, Belarus is crucial to the EU's objectives of enhancing regional stability, promoting democratic governance, and upholding human rights. Nevertheless, the EU-Belarus relationship encounters various challenges due to divergent political systems and priorities.

Belarus's geopolitical significance is underscored by its position between the EU and Russia, acting as a point of convergence for Western and Eastern influences. The EU's strategy towards Belarus merges strategic interests with normative aspirations. While the EU aims to foster a stable and democratic neighbourhood, under President Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus often resists these efforts, maintaining the neoauthoritarian regime since 1994. This disparity in political governance results in sustained tensions in EU-Belarus relations.

The EU's focus on Belarus forms part of a broader strategy to ensure regional security and promote economic integration with a normative emphasis. Initiatives such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) were designed to encourage political and economic reforms in neighbouring countries. Through the ENP and EaP, the EU sought to support democratic governance and economic reforms². However, Lukashenko's rise and establishment of the neoauthoritarian regime in Belarus have posed substantial challenges to these initiatives. Wilson³ provides an in-depth analysis of these challenges and the political dynamics between the EU and Belarus, detailing the EU's strategic use of sanctions in response to human rights violations and undemocratic practices. His research illustrates the complex interaction between economic cooperation and political resistance, highlighting the limitations of the EU's normative influence in effecting change in Belarus.

Human rights violations in Belarus remain a significant concern for the EU and are a recurrent theme in scholarly work. Reports from human rights organisations underscore ongoing repression, a lack of political freedoms, and the persecution of opposition figures (Human Rights Watch⁴; Amnesty International⁵). The EU has primarily responded through sanctions and diplomatic pressure to hold the Belarusian government accountable⁶. Nonetheless, there is ongoing debate about the efficacy of these measures in effecting genuine improvements in human rights. The literature highlights these challenges in balancing strategic interests with normative objectives.

The failure of the 2020 anti-authoritarian democratic protests and Belarus's subsequent support for Russian actions against Ukraine can be seen as a setback for the EU's normative approach to

² Korosteleva, E. (2013). "Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood", *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, vol. 4, pp.11-36.

³ Wilson, A. (2016). *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. Yale University Press, p.235-255.

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2024). *World Report 2024: Belarus – Events of 2023*, retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/belarus>.

⁵ Amnesty International (2024). *The State of the World's Human Rights: April 2024*. Index Number: POL 10/7200/2024, retrieved from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/7200/2024/en/>.

⁶ European External Action Service (2020). *EU-Belarus Relations*. European Union, retrieved from: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas>.

supporting civil society and democratic movements. This underscores the enduring difficulties in fostering meaningful political reform under a deeply entrenched authoritarian regime⁷.

Despite these political challenges, the EU has consistently supported cross-border projects with Belarus. These initiatives lay the groundwork for promoting European values among ordinary citizens and warrant thorough investigation.

This article explores the multifaceted cooperation between the EU and Belarus, focusing on the impacts of cross-border cooperation (CBC) Programmes. These Programmes represent a critical component of the EU's strategy to engage with Belarus, aiming to foster regional development, enhance cross-border relations, and integrate European values into Belarusian society.

This study examines the history and impact of EU-Belarus CBC between 2004, when they were first introduced, and the first half of 2022, when the European Commission suspended these initiatives.

To comprehensively understand the EU-Belarus relationship through the lens of CBC Programmes, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What were the underlying motives of the EU and Belarus in pursuing CBC Programmes?
2. How did these Programmes navigate the contradictions between the EU's normative values and Belarus's political realities?

This analysis aims to comprehensively examine the historical and current developments in EU-Belarus relations, focusing on the tangible outcomes of CBC Programmes.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE) is pivotal for understanding the EU's external relations, especially with Eastern European countries such as Belarus. Defined by Manners, NPE suggests that the EU's identity and influence are anchored not solely in its economic and political might but also in its capacity to shape international norms and values⁸. This theoretical perspective highlights the EU's dedication to promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law beyond its borders.

NPE posits that the EU's normative power is reflected in its efforts to integrate these values into international relations. This is particularly pertinent in the ENP, the EaP, and future programs like Interreg Next, which initial aim was to stimulate political and economic reforms in neighbouring non-EU states, including Belarus. The EU's strategy towards Belarus can thus be viewed as part of its larger initiative to create a stable and democratic neighbourhood through normative influence.

Conversely, Belarus's strategy in its EU relations can be comprehended through Rational Choice Theory (RCT). This theory suggests that states behave rationally, making choices based on cost-benefit analyses to maximise their interests. RCT implies that Belarus, under Lukashenko, has adopted a pragmatic foreign policy, emphasising economic advantages and political stability over normative objectives. This is demonstrated by Belarus's strategic alignment with Russia and its selective engagement with the EU. Scholars like Krasner⁹ assert that states often seek international cooperation to gain specific material benefits while minimising costs.

This approach was visible in Belarus's participation in CBC Programmes, which provide substantial economic and technical assistance without necessitating significant political reforms.

In this study, I adopt a constructivist approach to understanding the dynamics of CBC Programmes between the EU and Belarus. By focusing on the perceptions and reported motivations of the involved actors, it is analysed how these stakeholders navigate the tension between the normative incentives of promoting European values and regional integration and the strategic incentives of economic benefits and political stability. This approach allows us to understand better how Belarusian and EU actors perceive and reconcile these often-conflicting motivations within the context of CBC initiatives.

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to analysing the EU-Belarus relationship through the lens of CBC Programmes, focusing on these initiatives' political, economic, and social impacts.

⁷ Kazharski A. (2021). "Belarus' new political nation? 2020 anti-authoritarian protests as identity-building". *New Perspectives*, 29(1), 69–79.

⁸ Manners, I. (2002). "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (2), pp. 235-258.

⁹ Krasner, S. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organised Hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.

The methodology integrates qualitative analyses of policy documents and evaluation reports with quantitative data from international trade statistics, financial records, and economic reports.

The qualitative analysis is based on thoroughly examining various documents and reports that outline specific provisions for implementing CBC Programmes. Primary sources include official EU and Belarusian government publications, while secondary sources encompass academic articles, economic analyses, and reports from international organisations. Content analysis is used to indicate critical themes and patterns from these documents. The analysis identifies the main objectives, challenges, and outcomes of CBC Programmes and the EU and Belarus's strategic interests and policy goals.

In addition to CBC Programme documents analysis, 17 in-depth interviews with representatives of various Belarusian institutions participating in different CBC Programmes have been conducted. These interviews provide qualitative data on the experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of participating in cross-border cooperation activities. The interviewees include former officials from government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private sector representatives, offering a broad perspective on the impact of CBC initiatives.

Presentation of the main material

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Belarus emerged as an independent nation facing significant economic and strategic challenges. The early 1990s were marked by attempts to liberalise the economy and organise political structures, crucial steps for establishing the foundations of the new state. Initially, Belarus aimed for a balanced foreign policy, engaging with the West and Russia. However, Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994 shifted the country towards more neoauthoritarian governance.

The EU's engagement with Belarus started with optimism following the Soviet collapse, intending to integrate Belarus into European economic and political frameworks. During the mid-1990s, the EU sought to foster relationships with Eastern European countries to stabilise the region and extend democratic norms and economic cooperation.

Belarus was included in this vision, and in 1995, the EU and Belarus signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) to enhance trade, investment, and mutual economic cooperation. Initial EU efforts focused on promoting democratic reforms and market economy transitions through programs like TACIS, which supported transition economies of former Soviet states with technical assistance and financial aid¹⁰.

However, the PCA was never ratified due to the EU's concerns over human rights and democratic deficiencies in Belarus. The political climate in Belarus hardened, with frequent government crackdowns on opposition and media freedoms, leading to strained relations with the West.

Furthermore, Russia's influence on Belarus complicates the EU's efforts to promote democratic values and human rights, as Moscow provides substantial political and economic support to Lukashenko's regime¹¹.

As Lukashenko's regime grew more repressive, the EU imposed a series of sanctions to curb human rights abuses and encourage democratic reforms. Many scholars, like Bosse¹² for instance, critically examines the impact of these sanctions, questioning their effectiveness in altering Belarus's political landscape. The analysis indicates that while sanctions signal EU disapproval, they have had limited success in fostering significant political change.

Economically, the EU's trade relations with Belarus are vital for both economies. The EU is one of Belarus's largest trading partners, highlighting their economic interdependence. In 2023, Belarus exported approximately €1.4 billion worth of goods to the EU, while imports from the EU reached

¹⁰ Frear, M. (2020). *Belarus under Lukashenko: Adaptive Authoritarianism*. Routledge, London.

¹¹ Carpenter, M. and Kobets, V., (2020) "What Russia Really Has in Mind for Belarus: And Why Western Leaders Must Act". *Foreign Affairs*, 8 September.

¹² Bosse, G. (2013). "Values versus Security? Assessing the EU's Pragmatic Engagement with Belarus in the Eastern Partnership Policy". In G. Noutcheva, K. Pomorska, & G. Bosse (Eds.), *The European Union and Its Neighbours: Values versus Security in European Foreign Policy*. Manchester University Press, pp. 173–194.

about €5.9 billion, illustrating a significant trade deficit and the EU's crucial role as a supplier of essential goods and services to Belarus¹³.

Belarus's strategic importance as an energy transit corridor is also notable. The Druzhba pipeline, which runs through Belarus, is a critical conduit for Russian oil exports to Europe. This makes Belarus a key player in the EU's energy security strategy, as the stability and functionality of Belarusian transit routes are essential for ensuring uninterrupted energy supplies to the EU¹⁴.

Despite these significant economic engagements, the EU's cooperation has not influenced Belarus's political landscape. The Belarusian authorities often prioritise economic gains in their relations with the EU while resisting political reforms. While the EU has provided substantial economic support and investment, it has struggled to leverage these resources to effect meaningful political change and democratic reforms in Belarus¹⁵. For example, the limited impact of EU sanctions and economic incentives following Belarus's presidential elections in 2010 and 2020 demonstrates the challenge. Despite the EU's efforts to promote democratic governance and human rights, the Belarusian government has largely maintained its neoauthoritarian stance, making few concessions to EU demands¹⁶.

Despite the numerous mutual challenges affecting their bilateral relations, there was one aspect of EU–Belarus cooperation that yielded genuinely positive outcomes: the cross-border cooperation Programmes.

A context analysis of official EU documents shows that initially the EU had several reasons for launching and promoting cross-border cooperation with Belarus¹⁷. Due to the normative approach via a strong commitment to promoting human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law even, despite significant human rights violations in Belarus, the EU has continued supporting CBC Programmes with Belarus for almost 20 years. This can be attributed to several factors:

1. Sustainable development. CBC Programmes align with the EU's broader objectives of promoting sustainable development and environmental protection. These initiatives support the EU's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals by addressing environmental challenges, enhancing resource management, and promoting social inclusivity. Investing in CBC Programmes with Belarus, the EU authorities thought about peripheral border regions of Poland, Litva and Lithuania that received significant support from CBC instruments. For Belarus, these Programmes help improve infrastructure and connectivity with EU markets, providing tangible economic benefits while laying the groundwork for deeper economic ties.

2. "Soft power" aspect. As former EC President Jean-Claude Juncker stated, "The EU must continue to be a beacon of hope and an example of governance for our neighbours"¹⁸. Engaging in CBC Programmes allows the EU to project its values and standards beyond its borders. Despite the political tensions, the EU used CBC Programmes to maintain engagement with Belarusian society and indirectly promote European values – this strategic engagement aimed to build goodwill and foster a pro-European outlook among the Belarusian populace.

Belarusian authorities have agreed to participate in CBC Programmes driven by pragmatic economic and political motives.

1. Economic reasons. Participation in CBC Programmes provided Belarus with access to substantial financial aid and technical assistance from the EU. The total financial support from various CBC Programmes, including TACIS and EaPTC, amounts to around €325.6 million, highlighting the

¹³ European Commission (2023). *EU Trade Relationships with Belarus. Facts, figures and latest developments.*, retrieved from: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/belarus_en.

¹⁴ Juutilainen, K. (2021). *Assessment of Belarus' Energy Strategic Situation in 2020-2022 and its Likely Consequences*. NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence, retrieved from: <https://www.enseccoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2021-10-assessment-of-belarus-energy-strategic-situation-in-2020-2022-its-likely-consequences.pdf>.

¹⁵ Korosteleva, E. (2012). *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: Towards a More Ambitious Partnership?* Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203128992.

¹⁶ Wilson, A. (2016). *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. Yale University Press, p.255-257.

¹⁷ Paused in 2020 and fully terminated in 2022.

¹⁸ Juncker, J. (2017). *State of the Union 2017 Address*. European Commission, retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_17_3165.

significant economic benefit for Belarus. These resources were critical for addressing infrastructure deficits and promoting regional development, particularly in economically underdeveloped border regions. This can be seen as a strategic move to ensure economic stability and prevent social unrest in these areas.

2. Strategic balancing. By engaging with the EU through CBC programmes, Belarus wanted to extract economic benefits while maintaining its political alignment with Russia. This strategy allowed Belarus to play both sides, leveraging economic support from the EU without fully committing to the political and normative demands often associated with such aid.

3. It is softening EU pressure. Participation provided Belarus with a platform to demonstrate a degree of cooperation with the EU, potentially softening EU pressure related to human rights and democratic reforms. Belarus argued for continuing economic support despite its political stance by being willing to engage economically and technically. This tactic was evident in statements from Belarusian officials emphasising the pragmatic benefits of CBC while downplaying the EU's normative expectations. As Wilson stated, "Engaging in CBC programmes helps Belarus mitigate EU criticism by showcasing economic cooperation"¹⁹.

Rational calculations drove Belarusian participation in CBC Programmes to maximise economic and political gains. This pragmatic approach allowed Belarus to maintain its political stance while reaping the economic advantages of CBC Programmes.

A more detailed analysis of the EU-Belarus cross-border cooperation is needed to understand how these motives were realised in practice.

The EU-Belarus cross-border cooperation: practical aspects

The history of EU-Belarus cross-border cooperation dates back to the early 1990s when Belarus began actively seeking cooperation and partnership with the European Union after gaining independence from the Soviet Union. The Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) Program was one of the first significant initiatives. TACIS was launched by the European Commission in 1991 to provide technical assistance and support for economic reform and recovery in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, including Belarus.

Cooperation gained momentum after the 2004 EU enlargement, which brought several new member states sharing borders with Belarus, such as Poland, Litva, and Lithuania. Consequently, cross-border cooperation programs under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument were launched, supporting joint initiatives in infrastructure development, environmental protection, and people-to-people contacts.

The first Cross-border Cooperation Programmes, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus, within the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) framework, have been operational since 2004. These Programmes were launched following a year of preparations and consultations, resulting in continuous operation for almost 20 years.

The Programme's geographical coverage was determined based on NUTS 3 units (subregions) in Poland, Lithuania, and the oblast divisions in Belarus²⁰. This includes almost all oblasts: Vitebsk, Grodno, and Brest as core regions and Gomel, Mogilev, and Minsk as adjoining regions. Notably, the city of Minsk is excluded from the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme but was considered an adjoining region for the Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus Programme.

The primary objective of the Programmes was to support and promote integrated regional development in neighbouring border regions, including those at the European Union's external borders.

Since 2004, the EU-Belarus cooperation started, and 554 Polish, 155 Belarusian, 120 Lithuanian, and 89 Latvian institutions have been involved in implementing various projects²¹.

These collaborations have covered various sectors, including infrastructure development, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social services. In terms of finance, as much as 414.1

¹⁹ Wilson, A. (2016). *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. Yale University Press.

²⁰ According to the Programmes documents: PL-BY-UA 2014-2020 (N.D). *Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020*, retrieved from: <https://www.pbu2020.eu/en/pages/287>; European Neighbourhood Instrument 2014-2020 (N.D). *Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus ENI CBC Programme 2014-2020*, retrieved from: <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/llb/en/programme/documents/6/act86>.

²¹ Own calculations based on information from Keep.eu.

MEUR have been allocated from the EU funds for the support in three editions of the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine cross-border cooperation (see *Table 1*). Approximately 10 % of all EU funds were allocated to the technical assistance budget; therefore, 372 MEUR has been dedicated to particular project activities.

Table 1.

Allocated financial resources from CBC Programmes

2004-2006	2007-2013	2014-2020
<i>Total budget:</i>		
7 MEUR ²²	267.7 MEUR, including about 89 MEUR for BY side	278.3 MEUR 96,9 MEUR for BY side

Source: Data from the Programmes implementation reports.

During the 2004-2006 and 2007-2013 Programme editions, 68 cross-border projects with Belarusian partners were implemented, and 90 projects were completed²³ (including micro-projects) were implemented in the 2014-2020 Programme editions (see *Table 2*).

Table 2:

Thematic objectives and number of CBC projects involving Belarusian partners

Thematic objective	Number of Projects
Promoting economic and social development	50
Addressing common challenges in environment, public health, safety, and security	30
Promotion of better conditions and modalities for ensuring the mobility of persons, goods, and capital	40
Encouraging local cross-border "People-to-People" actions	38

To assess the effectiveness of the EU's normative approach in Belarus, examining the fluctuation in public support for the EU over time clearly indicated the success of EU 'soft power' in the region.

Public opinion in Belarus regarding cooperation and integration with the EU has varied over time, influenced by political events, economic conditions, and media coverage.

During the early years after Belarus gained independence in 1991, public opinion towards the EU was relatively uncertain as the country navigated its post-Soviet transition. Initial support levels ranged from 20% to 30%, reflecting a gradual shift in public opinion as Belarus faced economic challenges and looked towards the EU for potential economic opportunities. However, most respondents were indifferent or favoured maintaining closer ties with Russia²⁴.

In the 2000s, public opinion continued to evolve, with increasing support for EU integration as Belarusian citizens sought economic stability and political reform. By 2004, when EU-Belarus CBC cooperation officially began, support for EU integration had risen to 40%, while around 25% of respondents were undecided²⁵. This period marks a significant point in evaluating the EU's normative influence, showing an upward trend in support. Later, public opinion was marked by fluctuations due to political events such as the 2010 presidential elections and subsequent protests. The EU's imposition of sanctions on Belarus also influenced public sentiment. In 2010, support for EU

²² Allocation: 7.0 MEUR – Tacis CBC.

²³ Own calculations based on information from Keep.eu.

²⁴ Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (IISEPS) (1995–2023). National Polls [Results of public opinion polls on Belarusian attitudes towards the EU, retrieved through correspondence with the editorial team]. Available at: https://www.iiseps.org/?page_id=2056&lang=en; IISEPS (2015). "Trends Of Change In Belarusian Public Opinion", retrieved from <https://www.iiseps.org/?p=114&utm&lang=en>.

²⁵ Ibid.

integration dropped to 37% following the controversial presidential elections and the EU's imposition of sanctions²⁶. These fluctuations highlight the challenges faced by the EU's normative approach when confronted with internal political instability in Belarus.

In recent years, major political events have significantly influenced public opinion, including the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on protests. The EU's response and increased support for Belarusian civil society have also shaped public attitudes. Following the disputed 2020 presidential election and the EU's vocal support for democratic reforms, support for EU integration rose to 45%, reflecting public hope for change and better governance²⁷. However, continued political repression and the significant emigration of pro-democratic Belarusians led to a decline in support to less than 40% as fears of further instability grew²⁸. Recent data indicate that approximately 42% of Belarusians express balanced support for both closer ties with Russia and the European Union, reflecting a dual alignment approach. Within this group, about one-third specifically favor integration with the EU²⁹. These trends suggest a resilient yet fluctuating influence of EU soft power amidst political repression.

Among participants in CBC Programmes in Belarus, support for the EU was significantly higher. During the initial stages of CBC Programmes (2004-2006), Belarusians' general awareness and perception of these initiatives needed to be higher, primarily due to limited exposure and understanding of the potential benefits. According to evaluation reports from the TACIS Programme, approximately 25% of respondents in border regions were aware of CBC initiatives, and about 15% perceived them as beneficial for local development³⁰. Awareness gradually increased as more projects were implemented, focusing on infrastructure and public services.

During the period when CBC Programmes were actively implemented in Belarus, surveys conducted under the CBC Programmes 2007-2013 period evaluation showed that approximately 40% of survey respondents reported that CBC initiatives positively impacted local community activities and environmental and health initiatives. During the following Programme period (2014-2020), the level of supporters increased. Surveys in 2020 showed that 60% of respondents in the Belarusian border regions reported being aware of CBC initiatives, with 50% acknowledging their significant contribution to local economic and social development (ENI Evaluation, 2020). Around 45% of Belarusian respondents noted that CBC initiatives helped implement relevant EU standards in the local environment and public health. Additionally, 30% of respondents recognised the benefits of enhanced governance and administrative capabilities resulting from these projects.

By analysing these trends, it becomes evident that while the EU's normative approach has faced significant challenges, especially during periods of heightened political repression in Belarus, the overall level of support for EU integration has shown resilience. The data suggests that the EU's efforts in promoting democratic values and human rights, coupled with the tangible benefits of CBC initiatives, had positively impacted Belarusian public opinion, albeit with periodic setbacks due to internal political dynamics.

Unfortunately, the European landscape of cross-border cooperation was drastically altered in the aftermath of Russia's military aggression into Ukraine on 24 February 2022, further complicated by Belarus's evident involvement. This aggression precipitated a decisive response from the European Commission, which decided to halt collaboration with Russia and Belarus in cross-border cooperation

²⁶ IISEPS 2010.

²⁷ EU Neighbours East (2020). "Opinion Survey 2020: Belarus", retrieved from <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/opinion-polls/opinion-survey-2020-belarus/>.

²⁸ EU Neighbours East (2022). "Annual Survey 2022: Belarus", retrieved from <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2022-belarus/>.

²⁹ Astapenia, R. (2020). "What Belarusians Think About Their Country's Crisis", Belarusian Polls, retrieved from <https://en.belaruspolls.org/analysis/what-belarusians-think>; Belarusian Analytical Workroom (2023), Многофакторная структура белоруского общества [Multifactorial Structure of Belarusian Society], retrieved from https://bawlab.eu/BAW_Social_Structure.html.

³⁰ Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej (2015). "Ocena wpływu Programu Sąsiedztwa INTERREG III A/Tacis CBC Polska-Białoruś-Ukraina 2004-2006 na osiągnięcie spójności gospodarczej, społecznej i terytorialnej na obszarze transgranicznym objętym wsparciem," retrieved from: <https://www.ewaluacja.gov.pl/strony/badania-i-analizy/archiwum-2004-2015/ocena-wplywu-programu-sasiedztwa-interreg-iii-atacis-cbc-polska-bialorus-ukraina-2004-2006-na-osiagniecie-spojnosci-gospodarczej-spolecznej-i-terytorialnej/>.

Programmes for the financial perspective 2021-2027. Consequently, a formal communication was issued to exclude Belarus from these initiatives. By March 2022, the Commission moved to suspend the 2014-2020 financing deals and the 2021-2027 programming process with Russia and Belarus due to their explicit support for military aggression.

The Russian aggression questioned the viability of nine of the 17 proposed Interreg NEXT programs. These nine initiatives accounted for nearly €304 million or almost 30% of the projected total allocation³¹. Even though the CBC's cooperation with Belarus has been stopped, anonymous in-depth interviews with relevant actors were conducted to gain insights into such programs' implications and prospects. These interviews were conducted during March-May of 2024 and covered current and former representatives of Belarusian local authorities, program bodies, and NGOs previously involved in CBC.

The anonymous nature of these interviews was essential due to the current political climate in Belarus, where pro-EU activities, including positive opinions about CBC, could lead to negative consequences or even repression by Belarusian authorities. The following analysis is based on these interviews and aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of Belarusian stakeholders on the cessation of CBC programs.

Participants emphasised that one of the primary motivations for Belarusian authorities to engage in CBC programs was access to financial resources and technical assistance from the EU. These resources were essential for modernising infrastructure and boosting local economies, particularly in border regions. For example, a former local government official from the Brest region noted: "Through CBC initiatives, we addressed the economic and social needs of our border regions, which were often neglected. In Brest, for instance, the funding allowed us to upgrade local roads and public facilities, significantly improving locals' quality of life"³².

From a political perspective, Belarusian authorities viewed CBC programs as a strategic tool to balance relations between the EU and Russia. By engaging in CBC, Belarus could secure economic benefits from the EU while maintaining political alliances with Russia. A former NGO representative highlighted this dual approach with such words:

"Participating in CBC programs allowed us to gain financial and technical benefits from the EU without fully aligning politically with European norms. The economic incentives from CBC projects helped us develop local businesses while we continued to navigate our political alignment with Russia"³³.

CBC programs were also instrumental in addressing social and environmental issues. Projects focusing on environmental protection, healthcare, and education were particularly valued. According to the interviews, these initiatives improved the quality of life in border regions by promoting sustainable development and enhancing social services. For instance, one participant from the Vitebsk region stated: "The CBC Programmes helped us adopt EU standards in the environmental sector. In Vitebsk, for example, we successfully carried out several projects aimed at reducing pollution in local rivers, improving water quality, and raising environmental awareness among residents. I am aware that this would not have been possible without EU support"³⁴.

Despite the benefits, participants acknowledged several challenges in implementing CBC programs. Political repression and the lack of genuine political reforms in Belarus were significant barriers. The EU's normative approach, emphasising human rights and democratic governance, often clashed with Belarus's pragmatic, economically driven participation. As one former program

³¹ European Commission (2022). "Commission Suspends Cross-Border Cooperation and Transnational Cooperation with Russia and Belarus." Press Release, March 4, Brussels, retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1526.

³² Anonymous Interview (2024). Unpub-lished raw data #2 (March) conducted as part of research on cross-border cooperation, retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bc-4e3JdXOeoLBq_wgQyZ00aWWtkPA-9/edit (accessed 1 December 2024).

³³ Anonymous Interview (2024). Unpub-lished raw data #12 (April), conducted as part of research on cross-border cooperation, retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bc-4e3JdXOeoLBq_wgQyZ00aWWtkPA-9/edit (accessed 1 December 2024).

³⁴ Anonymous Interview (2024). Unpub-lished raw data #11 (Apri), conducted as part of research on cross-border cooperation, retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bc-4e3JdXOeoLBq_wgQyZ00aWWtkPA-9/edit (accessed 1 December 2024).

coordinator mentioned: “While the EU’s focus on promoting democratic values is understandable, it sometimes created friction with our more pragmatic, economic-focused approach. Efforts to integrate EU governance standards into local projects were met with resistance due to political sensitivities, KGB pressure and the central government’s priorities”³⁵.

Therefore, it is evident that, prior to their suspension, CBC Programmes represented a distinctive point of convergence between the EU’s strategic interests and Belarus’s practical needs. While the EU adopted a normative approach, championing human rights and democratic governance, Belarus often participated in these programmes chiefly to secure economic benefits and pragmatic forms of collaboration – especially during periods of tense relations with Russia. Nonetheless, these CBC Programmes successfully embedded European values within Belarusian border regions, laying the groundwork for future cooperation and deeper integration in a post-Lukashenko Belarus.

Conclusion

The relationship between the EU and Belarus, mainly through CBC Programs, reflected a nuanced interaction between the EU’s normative objectives and Belarus’s practical interests. The EU consistently prioritises promoting human rights, democratic governance, and sustainable development. Conversely, Belarus participated in these programs primarily for economic gains and practical collaboration, especially when facing challenges in its relations with Russia.

Belarusian public opinion has echoed these dynamics, with support for EU integration varying in response to political developments and economic conditions. There have been times of increased support for the EU, notably following the 2020 presidential election and the EU’s outspoken advocacy for democratic reforms. However, ongoing political repression has also led to decreases in support. Notably, participants in CBC Programs tended to show higher levels of EU support, indicating that these initiatives play a crucial role in nurturing pro-European sentiment.

The tangible effects of CBC Programmes had been considerable. These initiatives have bolstered local governance, economic growth, and social cohesion. Projects financed under the CBC framework have improved transportation and communication infrastructure, which is vital for facilitating trade and mobility. Additionally, CBC Programmes have supported Belarusian small and medium-sized enterprises, enhancing their competitiveness and integration into European markets. Environmental sustainability has also been a significant focus, with projects aimed at reducing pollution, managing resources, and preparing for disasters, all contributing to improved quality of life and community resilience.

Interviews with stakeholders, including representatives from Belarusian local authorities, program bodies, and NGOs, have confirmed the dual motivations behind Belarus’s participation in CBC Programs. While Belarusian authorities appreciate the EU’s financial and technical support, they strategically use these programs to balance relations between the EU and Russia. This pragmatic approach underscores the challenges in aligning the EU’s normative goals with Belarus’s practical needs.

Despite these challenges, CBC Programmes had successfully embedded European values within Belarusian society, laying a foundation for future cooperation and deeper integration. The tangible benefits these programs brought – from infrastructure improvements to enhanced social services – demonstrate the potential of CBC initiatives to foster positive change even in politically complex environments.

While this study comprehensively analyses the EU-Belarus relationship through CBC Programmes, several limitations must be acknowledged. The political climate in Belarus poses significant challenges to data collection, as many participants in CBC initiatives may be hesitant to share their experiences due to fear of reprisal. This limitation was partially mitigated by conducting anonymous in-depth interviews, but it may still affect the completeness of the data. Additionally, the study mainly relies on available evaluation reports and surveys, which may not fully capture the nuanced impacts of CBC Programmes on local communities. The absence of longitudinal data makes it challenging to assess these initiatives’ long-term effects thoroughly.

³⁵ Anonymous Interview (2024). Unpub-lished raw data #9 (April), conducted as part of research on cross-border cooperation, retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bc-4e3JdXOeoLBq_wgQyZ00aWWtkPA-9/edit (accessed 1 December 2024).

Future research should focus on a more detailed longitudinal analysis of CBC Programmes' impacts on Belarusian society, economy, and governance. This includes tracking the long-term outcomes of specific projects and their contributions to regional stability and development. Additionally, comparative studies involving other Eastern Partnership countries could offer deeper insights into the effectiveness of the EU's normative approach in diverse political and socioeconomic contexts.

Exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders, including local communities, government officials, and grassroots organisations, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of CBC Programmes' impacts. Research should also investigate the potential for expanding CBC initiatives to include more robust mechanisms for promoting democratic governance and human rights, given the unique challenges faced in neoauthoritarian regimes like Belarus.

In summary, while the EU's normative approach has encountered significant obstacles in Belarus, the continued support for CBC Programs and their tangible benefits indicated a pathway for ongoing engagement and potential transformation. By addressing the EU's strategic interests and Belarus's practical needs, CBC Programs before 2022 represented a unique and effective tool for fostering cooperation, enhancing regional stability, and promoting sustainable development. Despite external challenges, it is clear that CBC initiatives hold considerable potential and, even though they are currently suspended, could be instrumental in rebuilding mutual cooperation following positive political changes in Belarus.

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