

The European Union's Strategic Non-Engagement in Belarus Challenging the Hegemonic Notion of the EU as a Toothless Value Diffuser

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Abstract: Beyond the European Union's increasingly fortified eastern border lies the continent's blind spot – Europe's last dictatorship. The Republic of Belarus, which slid into authoritarian rule in the mid-1990s, is amongst the academically most underinvestigated states in contemporary Europe. This article will contribute to the thin body of literature on Belarus by exploring the policies of the European Union, the continent's self-styled bringer of peace and prosperity, towards its unknown eastern neighbour. Within the existing literature on the EU's policies towards Belarus, the article identifies a dominant narrative, which depicts the Union as a 'toothless value diffuser'. This hegemonic notion shall be challenged and replaced by the concept of "strategic non-engagement", which more adequately describes the EU's approach vis-à-vis Minsk.

Key words: European Union, Belarus, value diffusion, Westphalian agenda, democratisation, stability, the EU's eastern neighbourhood, the "Russia factor"

INTRODUCTION

A simple EU-centred model of post-Cold War Europe will unearth the underlying power structures by distinguishing between three types of states – EU members, potential EU members and outsiders. Whilst the members of the first group decide upon the rules for accession and the members of the second group respond to the rules by remodelling their economies and state *apparati*, it is the third group that requires attention, for it is between the enlarged European Union and the latter group that the Europeans are witnessing the emergence of a new fault line – a "golden curtain".¹ The Republic of Belarus is clearly to be located in this outsider group. Minsk was in 2006 the only European capital that had not yet explicitly asked for admission to the exclusive Western club. Moreover, it is the only member of the former Soviet Union that does not have a contractual relationship with the EU. The young state does not only possess a comparatively anomalous form of government, but also an extraordinary position in the European system of states, which might best be described as westward isolation. The

exceptionality of the Belarusian case and the country's position in the Union's direct geographical proximity qualify it as an ideal testing ground for theories of European Foreign Policy (EFP).² Few theorists have however taken up the challenge. Yet, this should not imply that texts on the EU's policy towards Belarus have been theory-free.

In fact, a cluster of theoretically related ideas, for simplicity summarised under the term toothless value diffusion, can be identified as tacitly underlying the vast majority of contributions to the topic.³ As will be pointed out in more detail below, this notion of toothless-value diffusion, also referred to as model 1, rests on the assumption that the EU has an interest in engaging in Belarus. It however excuses the failure to achieve this goal by pointing at the circumstances under which the Union is forced to operate in its relations with the country. Hence, it creates the image of an EU that wishes to engage but is a victim of its own weakness. The tacitness and uncontested status of model 1, as well as its proximity to official sources on EU-Belarus relations are somewhat problematic. After all, any theory that confirms the government's official position in principle legitimises its actions and even its very existence. Robert Cox' words, "[t]heory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose", should be regarded as a warning in this respect (Cox, 1981: p. 359). Such a theory, whether explicit or implicit, may have the potential to obstruct a critical view and render impossible the intellectual aim of "speaking truth to power" (Said, 2001). Therefore, this article challenges this hegemonic model by contrasting it with a second notion, that of strategic non-engagement (model 2).

Both models depart from similar assumptions about the Union's interests – in both cases the EU is said to prioritise stability in its neighbourhood.⁴ Both models focus on the European Union as a more or less homogenous actor, although the first model stresses its status as *sui generis*. This might be problematic for various reasons, perhaps above all because of the fact that the EU does not possess the main features of statehood. Furthermore, this difference between the European Union and typical Westphalian states is significant in that its institutional framework is not comparable to that of any such state. Nevertheless, treating the EU as a homogenous actor *vis-à-vis* Belarus can be defended on the grounds that the EU's (in) actions have considerable impact on its external environment. Hence, it has been increasingly perceived as an actor in its direct neighbourhood. Secondly, even Westphalian states are less unitary than they were before the early 20th century. In fact it may be argued that whilst the European Union has been acquiring some of the attributes of Westphalian states, the foreign policy process in Westphalian states has become more like that of the European Union, decentralised and fuzzy. The competition of governmental and non-governmental actors in a Westphalian state is in many ways comparable to that of the member states and institutions on the EU level. Most importantly, it is possible to treat the EU as a homogeneous actor if one places the spotlight on the policy outcome as opposed to the policy process, which is the case in this study. Especially the second part will follow the latter approach by observing the way in which the EU's (in) actions shed light upon its interests.

This article poses the question as to which of the two chosen models, that of toothless value diffusion or that of strategic non-engagement, best describes the EU's policy towards Belarus. It claims that by employing the notion of the EU as a toothless value diffuser, the mainstream discourse has neglected a second, more Westphalian model, that of strategic non-engagement. Furthermore, it has helped to camouflage this second agenda by excusing the European Union for failing to achieve its explicit goal – the democratisation of a country that finds itself hurled back into the bleak days of the Brezhnev era. After a short description of EU–Belarus relations since the establishment of the republic in 1991, the essay will introduce the hegemonic model of toothless value diffusion and by x-raying the supporting evidence show its weaknesses. Subsequently, the model of strategic non-engagement will be advanced. This section will form an attempt to fill in the first model's gaps and urge scholars to re-conceptualise the European Union's actions towards Belarus.

THE EU'S POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS: THREE USEFUL SUBDIVISIONS

This short section aims at subdividing the time span between Belarusian independence in 1991 and the current state of affairs into three periods. This will enable the article to outline the evolution of the EU's policy and clarify some of the essentials. Initially, the European Communities' policy towards Belarus had been indistinguishable from the approach towards the other Western Newly Independent States (WNIS)⁵. In 1993 for instance, the young Belarusian state and the European Union, began the negotiations on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed two years later. Similar to the EU's relations with Ukraine, the policies originally aimed at freeing the WNIS from remaining Soviet nuclear warheads. On the Union's full agenda, the relations with Belarus and the other WNIS were however overshadowed by the EU's internal evolution and the gradual integration of East Central Europe into the Western institutional structures (Löwenhardt, 2005: p. 27). Hence, the first period was marked by relative disinterest and neglect from the side of the EU. When and whether this indifference finally ended is disputed. Whilst there are some signs that this lack of concern continued to be a driving force behind the EU's policies, the advance of the populist Alexander Lukashenka, who assumed the presidency after a landslide victory in 1994, is commonly regarded as a turning point towards a more concerned EU approach.

The first key event that impacted directly on the relationship was the EU's response to the November 1996 referendum by which Lukashenka established his firm grip over the country. In its 1997 Council Conclusions the Union failed to recognise the referendum, the constitutional changes made by the president, as well as the new puppet parliament. Furthermore, it devised a catalogue of measures to punish the emerging dictatorship, including the non-ratification of the PCA (Davidonis, 2001: p. 23). In the aftermath of these events the mutual relationship deteriorated rapidly with the 1998 Drazdy affair forming a nadir, during which a number of EU member state ambassadors were forced by the regime to leave their residences. Whilst some contributions on EU-Belarus relations claim that the

Union's policy underwent a second remodelling after the establishment of a "step-by-step approach" in 1999 (Schimmelfennig, 2005: p. 21), others have identified a 1997 policy framework, which has survived all major attempts to find a new approach (Lynch, 2005: p. 106).

This article claims that the next main turning point was the Union's Neighbourhood strategy, devised in response to the altered political landscape that was to accompany the 2004 enlargement. For both of the two chosen models, this last period is of relevance and must be regarded somewhat separately from previous phases. For model 1, the incentive for value promotion increased due to the fact that Belarus was to emerge as a direct neighbour of the enlarged Union. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is interpreted as a major attempt to offer Belarus an opportunity to cooperate and catch up with the West. Model 2, however, observes an increased motivation to harden the EU's new border and respect Russia's sphere of influence. Hence, this last period is characterised by diverging interpretations between the two models. It is now time to reveal their strengths and weaknesses.

Model 1: toothless value-diffusion

The dominant narrative on the European Union's policies towards Belarus depicts the EU as a toothless value diffuser. This image is loosely and tacitly built upon some of the recent non-realist conceptualisations of the EU as an external actor, including Ian Manners' idea of a "normative power" and Robert Cooper's notion of a "postmodern" foreign policy. Manners for instance emphasises that in addition to traditional accounts of the Union as an external actor, European Foreign Policy may be characterised as guided by "common principles and a willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions" (Manners, 2002: p. 239). Cooper maintains that "the postmodern, European answer to threats is to extend the system of cooperative empire ever wider" and consequently to engage in the European Union's neighbourhood (Cooper, 2003: p. 78). These statements rest on the idea that a specifically European identity and "the complex EU decision making contribut[e] to a strong resistance to geopolitical zero-sum thinking" (Löwenhardt, 2005: p. 41) and a "preference for engagement" (Smith, 2003: p. 107), especially in the field of human rights and democracy. Model 1 does however not argue that the diffusion of values has replaced an interest-based foreign policy; instead, it merely describes the means by which these interests are achieved.

Unlike model 2, the implicit notion of the EU as a toothless value diffuser sets out from the assumption that the EU and Belarus are the important objects to be examined in the context of the EU's policies towards Belarus. Whereas the European Union is depicted as a somewhat static actor, whose actions reflect the goal to promote its internal values, Belarus is assigned a more active role - it has the choice of accepting or rejecting the EU's offers. From this point of departure, the model proceeds by forwarding a set of partially interconnected statements. Firstly, the European Union is said to have a strong self-interest in the promotion of its values in Belarus. This interest includes the democratisation of Belarus with all its dimensions and

the introduction of Washington consensus reforms. Secondly, the EU is said in the past to have engaged in Belarus to diffuse its values. Thirdly, most defendants of this model conclude that the Union has failed to diffuse its values because of the unfavourable domestic structures in Belarus and most importantly, because of Belarusian self-isolation.

The hegemonic conceptualisation of the EU in its relations with Belarus is derived from the thin body of available literature on the topic, mostly from policy papers written for foreign policy think tanks. In order to counter the possible criticism of having created a straw man, it must be acknowledged that model 1 has simplified the dominant narrative to a necessary degree. Some of the texts that are tacitly based on the idea of toothless value diffusion for instance incorporate what later will be referred to as the “Russia factor”. It is however important to separate the two models, as they present the European Union in two distinctly different shapes. The following section will be structured according to the main statements, which have been chosen to identify the notion of toothless value diffusion. Where appropriate, it will also point out the similarity between the dominant academic and the official discourse.

1) The EU’s interest lies in the diffusion of its values in Belarus

The idea that the European Union has an interest in engaging in Belarus by diffusion of its values is based on both a simple and plausible logic, which model 2 however will criticise as being simplistic. Model 1 rests on the idea that conflict between states which have internalised the principles of liberal democracy and market capitalism is unlikely.⁶ Furthermore, states embracing Western principles such as the respect for human rights, the rule of law, and market capitalism, will be inclined to cooperate to their mutual benefit. Belarus with its authoritarian ruler and its Soviet-style command economy forms an anti-model to the European West, which makes it an enclave of uncertainty.

Based on the above and similarly to model 2, the authors using the toothless value diffusion framework identify stability as the EU’s primary goal in Belarus as part of the WNIS (Björn Hettne & Frederik Söderbaum, 2005: p. 550; Hiski Haukkala & Arkady Moshes, 2004: p. 13; Heinz Timmermann, 2003: p. 7). As in the case of Belarus an armed conflict is unlikely, the aim of stability is a response to the perceived dangers of internal unrest, which could threaten the Union’s trade with Russia. Secondly, so-called soft security threats, like immigration, cross-border crime, the proliferation of weapons, or environmental hazard serve as incentives to engage and ensure the stability in Belarus. Based on the above ideas about interdependence and further encouraged by the belief in the superiority of Western values, stability is to be achieved by the establishment of “systems of ‘good governance’ [...] and a certain degree of ‘westernisation’” (Guicherd, 2002: p. 11). This westernisation rests on two pillars – democratisation⁷ and economic restructuring (Dumasy, 2003: p. 184), the latter implicitly referring to the adoption of reforms which are in compliance to the rules set up by the Washington consensus institutions. The European Union is thus presented as an actor, which “seeks possibilities to

overcome Belarusian isolation” and has a strong interest in including Belarus in the “European family” (Piehl, 2005: pp. 255 & 303).⁸ The EU is said to have engaged in the export of its model of democracy in the WNIS “because it was confident that democratisation would ultimately result in stable, friendly states” (Löwenhardt, 2005: p. 34).

Without engaging in a discussion about the European Union’s (dis)interest in Belarus, the dominant narrative has chosen to adopt a view on the EU’s interests, which is dangerously similar to those interests propagated by the Union’s statements and documents itself. The European Security Strategy for instance speaks of the need to promote “a ring of well-governed states to the East of the European Union” (European Council, 2003: p. 8). In 2002, Romano Prodi exclaimed that the aim of the European Neighbourhood Policy in general was “to extend to this neighbouring region a set of principles, values, and standards which define the very essence of the European Union” (*as quoted in*: Kelly, 2006: p. 40). The Commission’s Country Strategy Paper on Belarus holds that, “the long-term goals of the EU are that Belarus be a democratic, stable, reliable, and increasingly prosperous partner” (European Commission, 2004: p. 3). It is almost needless to say that the objectivity and trustworthiness of official sources in the academic debate are to be doubted. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of critical distance between official and academic sources.

II) The European Union has engaged in Belarus to diffuse its values

Model 1 holds that the Union has continuously engaged in Belarus by the means of value diffusion. Since the authoritarian shift and especially since the adoption of a step-by-step policy in 1999, the Union is said to have acted to democratise Belarus with the vision of normalising the relationship (Piehl, 2005: p. 303). This second statement is also marked by closeness to the official position. Uta Zapf, member of the German Bundestag, for instance stressed that, “the EU has repeatedly held out its hand towards Belarus” (Zapf, 2003: p. 19), whilst some scholars have explained that “the EU gave Belarus several occasions to reverse its policies” (Gnedina, 2005: p. 29). Whereas academics have labelled the EU’s approach “value-based” when compared to the policies of the United States in the region (Haukkala, 2004: p. 20), the Commission’s Communication on Wider Europe emphasises the “EU’s commitment to common and democratic values” (European Commission, 2003: p. 15). After Belarus’ flawed elections of March 2006, Javier Solana, the EU’s High Commissioner for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, was quick to point out that the EU “would like to continue being engaged with the people of Belarus, [...] so that they really accept to move on to being a democratic country” (*as quoted in* Lobjakas: 2006). Whilst in the following the evidence for this statement is presented, model 2 will later question this claim by presenting counter-evidence that suggests that the EU’s approach may more adequately be described as non-engagement.

The proponents of model 1 argue that the EU’s policies have rested on a dual strategy that encompassed both positive engagement towards and pressure on Lukashenka’s Belarus. This “carrot and stick strategy” was

introduced in the second period of EU-Belarus relations, but may also be found in period three (Sadowski, 2003: p. 248). In the first period, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was granted to all members of the CIS, is said to have been the main tool for value diffusion in Belarus. Its agenda included assistance with the transition to a market-based economy and the establishment of a free trade zone, both dependent on Belarus' achievements in the political realm. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the previous section, the Union decided not to ratify the agreement in response to the domestic changes introduced by the government in Minsk, which formed part of its pressure approach.

In the second period, after the introduction of the EU's catalogue of punishments, the step-by-step approach tried to bring Belarus back on the track of economic and democratic transition, a policy that is said to "illustrat[e] the EU's commitment to encouraging peaceful opposition and a regard for human rights in the country" (Dumasy, 2003: p. 183). In the run-up to the 1999 parliamentary elections, the EU offered a revision of its policies, conditional on Belarusian reforms leading to a free and fair election. The EU sent a signal by returning its ambassadors to Minsk and lifted the initial visa bans, which resulted in Lukashenka's government signing the OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration, which supported the actions of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (Sadowski, 2003: p. 244).

The European Neighbourhood Policy has been interpreted by the proponents of model 1 to reflect value diffusion, as it "offered an opportunity [for Belarus] to join the enlarged EU's 'ring of friends'" (Haiduk, 2004: p. 130). The ENP would have aimed at the participation of Belarus in the European Common Market and the assistance with Belarus' integration into the global economy as well as increased cooperation in a variety of areas, including that of soft security. As however the ratification of the PCA serves as a precondition for the participation in the ENP, Belarus has been excluded from this key policy that governs the Union's relations with its periphery (Piehl, 2005: p. 314). The EU's engagement strategy throughout the second and third period was accompanied by repeated public condemnation of the regime. Furthermore, the Union froze the dialogue on the official level time after time and initiated a number of visa bans, as happened again in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential elections. In the last period, the European Union also increased its support for the Belarusian opposition. Javier Solana for instance met with opposition leaders in 2005. Additionally, the Commission started to co-fund "independent" broadcasting into Belarus, as for instance the short daily programmes, launched in 2005 by Deutsche Welle (Euractive, 2005).

III) The EU has failed to diffuse its values

As the dominant narrative rests on the assumption of the EU's interest in value promotion, the statement that the EU's policies have failed is nothing but a logical conclusion, given the continuing situation in Belarus (Lynch, 2005: p. 100; Gromadzki, 2005: p. 2).⁹ Whilst the European Union's official documents tend to avoid the word "failure", and therefore depart from the dominant academic narrative, they both find a common voice in explaining

the Union's apparent difficulties in exporting its values to Belarus – Belarusian self-isolation and the unfavourable domestic structures.

The idea that the unfavourable domestic structures have significantly contributed to the EU's "failure" focuses on two levels – the regime and the population. Model 1 convincingly argues that Lukashenka's regime neither has a basic interest in the transition to a liberal democracy, nor to a market-based economy. Whilst the former might weaken his grip over the opposition and the media, the latter would destroy one of the main pillars of his rule – the command economy. Furthermore, the weakness of the opposition is frequently mentioned as a factor undermining the success of the EU's strategy. As model 2 will argue, these obstacles are, however, far from insurmountable. Concerning the Belarusian population, some have identified a "misunderstanding of the notions of democracy and market economy" as an underlying impediment to the success of a Western-style transition (Gnedina, 2005: p. 33). Whilst it remains somewhat debatable whether there really is a "correct understanding" of these two concepts, the statement highlights a tendency to confuse the popular support for a cruel, but charismatic ruler with the rejection of forms of democratic organisation *per se*. Similarly, Belarusians' suspicion towards Washington consensus reforms, which after all did not have the promised effect on Russia and Ukraine,¹⁰ must not be interpreted as a general aversion towards transition. Other common explanations of the EU's failure include the lack of a clear national identity in Belarus as a basis for a democratic community (Davidonis, 2001: p. 33; Piehl, 2005: p. 256), a statement, which has been credibly refuted (Brzozowska, 2002). To conclude, the argument that unfavourable domestic structures have led to the failure of the EU's policies must be treated with great caution. Whilst the regime level obstacles are significant yet vanquishable, the idea that the Belarusian population presents an impediment to democratisation lacks substance.

The term "self-isolation" (Lindner, 2005. *See also*: Sadowski, 2003: p. 240; Haiduk, 2004: p. 127; Davidonis, 2001: p. 22; Timmermann, 2003: p. 16) unites academic and official sources (European Commission, 2006ii). Ernst Piehl even goes as far as to denounce the idea that the EU has participated in the isolation towards Belarus as a myth (Piehl, 2005: p. 304). Evidence for acts of self-isolation on the side of the regime may indeed be found in excess. Although the relationship with Russia has deteriorated to some degree during the two terms in office of Vladimir Putin, Belarus has orientated itself eastward at the expense of a closer relationship with the West. This is manifest in the regime's attempts to integrate with the Russian Federation whilst openly rejecting the possibility of accession to the European Union. Belarus has hardly made any attempts to fulfil the Istanbul criteria, which would allow the country to reacquire observer status in the Council of Europe, which it lost in 1997 (Haiduk, 2004: p. 110). In general, Belarus' uncooperative behaviour towards the phalanx of the EU, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, is well documented, making it unmistakably clear that Minsk has consciously acted to isolate itself from the West. However, by emphasising self-isolation as a reason for the EU's failure, one implicitly deemphasises or even rejects the European Union's

participation in Minsk's seclusion. The Union's active involvement in the isolation of Belarus is however of key importance to reach a satisfactory understanding of the matter, as model 2 argues.

Model 2: strategic non-engagement

Although it has been claimed that "as it stumbles into the region beyond its eastern border, the EU sometimes appears clumsy and somewhat reluctant", it is increasingly clear that the European Union is following a strategy in its eastern neighbourhood (Trenin: 2005, p. 8). Whilst this strategy may involve engagement and value diffusion towards some states and regions, model 2 claims that concerning Belarus the European Union's policies are best characterised by conscious non-engagement. Although it acknowledges that the EU has undertaken some limited actions against the regime in Minsk, model 2 argues that non-engagement describes the EU's approach more adequately than engagement or inconsistent engagement.

The idea of strategic non-engagement has received little attention in the contemporary debate despite the fact that some of its arguments are part of the mainstream discourse. Although the model is vaguely built upon realist ideas about power politics, it departs from Waltz's slim neo-realist theory in a number of aspects. Neither does model 2 reveal exogenous interests, nor does it rely on the absolute importance of material capabilities. However, it is realist in assigning Belarus the role of an object, and instead focuses on the EU and Russia, the wielders of power in Europe and their relationship analysed in terms of power. Secondly, it stresses the importance of perceived spheres of influence in contemporary Europe. Finally, model 2 questions the assertion that the EU's complex decision-making apparatus disallows a Westphalian foreign policy agenda.

This second model puts forth four statements. Firstly, the European Union's policy may best be described as that of non-engagement. Secondly, the European Union is said to prioritise the promotion of political stability in its neighbourhood, which serves the Union's perceived geo-economic as well as both hard and soft security interests. However, unlike in model 1, this stability is not necessarily one that is based upon democratic and economic transition. Thirdly, the EU is said to aim at creating a hard border between itself and Belarus by excluding the country from European integration. Finally, the European Union responds to Russian influence in the WNIS by not intervening with its full capacity in Belarus. Model 2 puts forth the idea that the EU has deliberately opted for a policy of non-engagement. Unlike the first model, the notion of strategic non-engagement does not principally describe the European Union's policy as a failure, as it does not use the same yardstick to measure success. In fact, it leaves room for the assertion that the Union has been able to promote its interests in Belarus. Moreover, Belarus and the EU have found a comfortable status quo, which enables both actors to divert attention to other fields of foreign political action (Guicherd, 2002: p. 28).

"[I]n its external action the Union [...] wants to be seen as an essentially normative power" (Haukkala, 2005: p. 2). Thus, the presence of an agenda of non-engagement is a thorn in the European Union's flesh. Whilst value

diffusion carries a positive connotation and legitimises the EU as an actor in international politics, which can be seen for instance in the Union's expansion to Central and Eastern Europe, a more Westphalian agenda is considered "immoral" and could lead to criticisms of the EU's policies by civil society. There is however evidence of Westphalian aspirations and of policies reflecting these interests, quite to the resentment of the EU officials and some academics who have upheld the image of the European Union as a foreign political actor *sui generis*.

1) The EU's non-engagement

When faced with an uncooperative dictatorship like Lukashenka's Belarus, there are two basic options of promoting change – an aggressive strategy of regime change or the provision of powerful incentives that nudge the regime in the direction of change. Whilst the first approach would be antagonistic towards the regime and try to remove the ruling elite, the second leaves the regime intact, but aims at changing its behaviour. The European Union, however, has chosen neither path. Model 1 has largely retrieved the evidence for characterising the EU as a toothless value diffuser from an elaboration on the EU's carrot and stick approach. Karen Smith has described Belarus as an "extreme case of an authoritarian regime apparently little enticed by the EU's carrots and little disturbed by the EU's sticks" (Smith, 2005: p. 770). It is important to stress that this observation by itself says little about the sticks and carrots. The carrots, given by the European Union to Belarus, were visibly ill-designed for uncooperative authoritarian states. The sticks, which mainly consisted of stripping the regime of its international legitimacy, were more geared at upholding the image of the EU as a democratising force than they were of any practical significance. The European Neighbourhood Policy has for instance little to offer as an incentive and the non-ratification of the PCA had little effect due to the existence of the most-favoured nation status (Hukkala, 2004: p. 29). Engagement has been sporadic and rather declaratory in nature. The public denunciation of Minsk has been limited to short periods before and after presidential and parliamentary elections and has in some cases been followed by some limited form of punishment. It is often the larger states that make sure that this penalty is not too severe, as the case of the recent visa bans shows (Lobjakas, 2006).

Furthermore, there exists a considerable discrepancy between the EU's actual policies and a list of possible actions the Union could have resorted to. This shows that the European Union did not exhaust its powers. Although the European Union demanded from Belarus to "fundamentally alter its course", it did not offer incentives that had the potential of impacting on the regime in Minsk (Lynch, 2005: p. 97). The European Union for instance did not hold out the long-term prospect of EU membership. Whilst to Lukashenka's anti-capitalist and anti-democratic government such a prospect would have been of little interest, it would have created pressure on the government by depriving the regime of the anti-Western image, which has been of great significance to Belarusian propaganda. The fact that the inclusion of the membership option as a powerful incentive for reforms is not as "totally unrealistic" as some scholars argue, can be seen from the fact

that the Union has followed a very different approach on the Balkans (Linder, 2004: p. 202).

The European Union has also had great “difficulties” in supplying the Belarusian opposition and civil society with financial support. In general, the EU’s financial support to the Belarusian non-governmental sector has remained insubstantial, especially when compared to the United States (Association of International Affairs, 2004: p. 29). The lack of higher financial efforts, which would have been part of a more hard-line strategy of regime change, is often blamed on the rigid TACIS system (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States). TACIS limits the EU’s aid only to states, which are willing to cooperate in this field, a precondition that is not met in Belarus for obvious reasons (Bertelsmann Stiftung, n.d.). Nevertheless, financial support to countries under authoritarian rule has been technically possible, as can be seen from the case of *Solidarność* in the 1980s, as Zurawski points out (Zurawski, 2005: p. 90). A number of other more symbolic facts illustrate the European Union’s disinterest in engaging in Belarus. Few member states maintain embassies in Minsk and the European Commission has not opened a delegation in Minsk, which demonstrates the Union’s indifference towards self-advertisement (Grant, 2006: p. 4). Neither has the European Union formulated a Common Strategy on Belarus, although Common Strategies on both Russia and Ukraine have been devised, nor was it particularly benevolent towards Poland’s proposal of an “Eastern dimension”. Having established the EU’s non-engagement, it is difficult to negate the “EU’s *de facto* isolation of Belarus” (Guicherd, 2002: p. 28).

II) Stability in Belarus

As stated above, the model of strategic non-engagement, similarly to model 1, puts forth the idea of stability as the key to the European Union’s interest in Belarus. As the field of energy security has risen on the EU’s agenda, Belarus has become of special interest to the Union as a transit country (European Commission, 2006ii). Belarus does not only possess shorter transit routes from Russia into the enlarged European Union, it has also charged lower fees for the transit of gas.

Beyond the status as a transit country, Belarus has however little to offer. Its economy is comparably insignificant, although its importance has risen since the accession of Poland and Lithuania. The Belarusian command economy is however relatively stable and will remain so if Moscow does not decide to significantly increase the energy prices, which Belarus still receives at a favourable rate. In 2001, the average income in Belarus was comparable to that of Latvia and considerably higher than in Bulgaria and Romania (United Nations, 2003: p. 238). On the UN’s human development index, Belarus ranked 53rd, just behind Latvia (50th) and before Romania (72nd) (ibid). Thus, there is no urgent need for the European Union to encourage economic stability in Belarus by Washington consensus reforms. Although Dimitri Trenin and others have referred to Belarus as a “political time bomb”, one may argue that the current political situation is comparably stable (Trenin, 2005: p. 3). Furthermore, unlike most other members of the

CIS, Belarus does not have any open border disputes or minority issues that are likely to disrupt into violent conflict. Most importantly, Alexander Lukashenka's iron fist and the opposition's weakness have decreased the chance of destabilisation.

In the realm of hard security we find the next reasons for the sufficiency of non-engagement. As Löwenhardt has pointed out, the WNIS "were considered a nuisance but unlike the successor states to Yugoslavia not as really troublesome or threatening" (Loewenhardt, 2005: p. 28). This especially counts for Belarus, which under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty destroyed more conventional weapons than France, the United Kingdom and the United States together (Martinov, 2002). In the first period after the demise of the Soviet Union, the West's attention towards Belarus focussed on the remaining nuclear war heads. After the Belarusian nuclear arsenal was however handed over to the Russian Federation, "Belarus fell off the EU radar screen" (Sadowski, 2003: p. 241). Additionally, the EU has also been little concerned with a possible threat from Belarus because of the fact that NATO did not respond in lockstep with the EU to Lukashenka's authoritarian reforms, but continued cooperation with Belarus for instance under the Partnership for Peace programme (Lindner, 2004: p. 200). To achieve its central aim of stability, the EU has neither actively needed to support reform, nor has it felt the need to prop up the regime as it has been the case with secular authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. A strategy of non-engagement has served its interests adequately.

III) The aim to build a hard outer border between the Union and Belarus.

The EU's border *vis-à-vis* Belarus may already today best be described as a *limes*. William Walters defines this form of a border as a dividing line "between a power and its outside" (Walters, 2004, p. 690). It is characterised by a certain degree of permanence and an aim to create stability around the empire or power erecting such a *limes*. "The problem facing those outside [...] is not the imperial domination or attempts to annex their resources, it is neglect and exclusion" (Hirst and Thompson, as quoted in Walters, 2004: p. 692). With regards to Belarus, this hard outer border, which would provide the EU with a new Westphalian feature, has a second dimension besides the one that it is simply materialising - it is consciously created. In the eyes of one observer "[a]t this stage the process seems to have run its course and the gates are being closed once again" (Anonymous, 2002: p. 157).

A powerful incentive for the creation of a hard eastern border is the possibility of a long-term enlargement fatigue, which to a certain degree is a result of the fear of the EU's imperial overstretch. This phenomenon can be observed in the discourse about an "ungovernable Union", which frequently arises when the EU and its media landscape discuss the accession of Turkey. Secondly, there is general consensus arising that although enlargement was a tool for the export of stability in the 1990s, further enlargements would be "a way of importing instability" (Economist, 2005). Thirdly, despite the fact that the Baltic States acceded to the EU, the former Soviet Union is still greeted with age-old suspicion by both public and elites.

There are clear signs that the EU is increasingly developing “egocentric[ity]” (Ulachovic, 2004: p. 207). Before the enlargement to East Central Europe was completed, Romano Prodi expressed his concern that the European Union could be “watered down” by “enlarging forever” (*as quoted in*: Haukkala, 2004: p. 15). Willy Bruggemann, Deputy Director of Europol, used stronger words when he declared that he regarded the main goal “to maintain fortress Europe, but based on a democratic approach” (*as quoted in*: Lavenex, 2005: p. 123). In a common unpublished study of the German and French foreign ministries it was made clear that the European Union should not seek to enlarge to Belarus or Ukraine (Bremer, 2000). This however does not mean that there has been no cross-border cooperation with Belarus, after all the containment of so-called soft security threats has ranked high on the Union’s agenda and there has been substantial cooperation between the two parties. Nevertheless, the “continued emphasis on the externalisation approach” (Lavenex, 2005: p. 136) does reflect the aim to harden the EU’s border *vis-à-vis* Belarus and to counter the “fuzziness” of the Union’s external borders (Zielonka, 2006).

IV) The “Russia factor”

Finally, model 2 argues that the European Union has opted for a policy of non-engagement due to the Russia factor. The Russia factor denotes the Union’s reluctance to engage in the WNIS, and in this case in Belarus, because of the presence of Russia. This behaviour is based on the fear that to engage in Belarus would be to penetrate the Russian sphere of influence, which would endanger the European Union’s relations with the post-imperial Russian rump state. It is the Russia factor, which makes the European Union look the most Westphalian, after all, the phenomenon makes it clear that it is embedded in a system of states and has to also adhere to the norms, which prevail in this system. Whilst the above sections have shown that the EU has abandoned the short- and mid-term goal of democratising and including Belarus in the European project, the Russia factor helps to explain this behaviour.

Due to the image of weakness the Russia factor creates and the fact that it undermines the idea of a normative agenda, it is denied by officials¹¹ and even some academics (Piehl, 2005: p. 320). In many contributions to the topic it is however present, whereas scholars from the Central and Eastern European region usually use the hardest words to describe it. Zurawski for instance names it the EU’s “political reluctance (or inability) to challenge Russian neo-imperial ambitions” (Zurawski, 2005: p. 90). He continues by stating that “by seeking to advance freedom and democracy in Belarus” [model 1], “the EU challenges Russian interests as they are defined currently by the Russian political elite” (*ibid*). Sadowski suggests that “it could be supposed that the low level of European engagement on Belarus is caused by the EU’s reluctance to stir up conflict with Russia” (Sadowski, 2003: p. 247). Whilst some scholars point at the fact that “the sheer level of attention granted to Russia is likely to reinforce the EU’s inclination to consider other NIS, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, in the shadow of Moscow and as second rank priorities” (Guicherd, 2002: p. 19), others claim that the

Union has decided to leave Belarus in the Russian sphere of influence for at least another decade (Ulachovic, 2004: p. 213).

Despite the fact that the concept of spheres of influence has come to be considered as somewhat archaic, it is clear that in Russian foreign political thinking the notion is far from obsolete. Russia's Mid-term strategy towards the EU clearly states under 1.6. that, "efforts will continue to be made for [...] the protection of Russia's legitimate interests" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 1999). Furthermore, it claims that Russia will oppose "possible attempts to hamper the economic integration in the CIS, in particular, through maintaining "special relations" with individual countries of the Commonwealth to the detriment of Russia's interests" (ibid). Although Russia's economic interests in Belarus are undeniable, there are a number of security reasons, which contribute to Russia's rejection of potential EU engagement in Belarus. The influential Council on Foreign and Defence Policy states that Belarus' geopolitical position is of central importance to counter the threat of a "Baltic-Black Sea belt isolating Russia" and of the "Kaliningrad special defence region" (Main, 2002: p. 2). Russia has a strong interest in maintaining a number of military sites including a missile warning system and a nuclear submarine command centre. Furthermore, despite the recent cooling down of mutual relations and the fact that the union state has largely remained a paper tiger, Belarus is still one of Russia's last loyal allies in the CIS. Despite the recent emphasis on its geo-economic strategy, Russia perceives the control of its "near abroad" as a steppingstone in the return to Great Power status and has thus rejected the Union's cautious attempt to place Belarus on the common agenda (Davidonis, 2001: p. 26). Whilst it is clear that Russia does not wish the European Union to engage in Belarus, it must be established that the European Union has actually respected the Russian sphere of influence and thus acted according to a Westphalian agenda.

Despite the fact that Javier Solana recently negated the Russia factor in an interview shortly before the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the so-called Solana-Patten Paper of August 2002, which served as a sketch of what was later to become the European Neighbourhood Policy, contradicts his latest statements (Solana, 2006). By declaring that "Russia is an indivisible part of the region", the papers tacitly acknowledges Russia's power over the WNIS and thus concludes that it is "difficult to imagine regional co-operation without Russia" (Patten & Solana, 2002). At a conference on the EU's new neighbours in Lviv in the year 2004 initiated by the Körber Stiftung, Wolfgang Schäuble, then Deputy Chairman for Foreign, Security and European Policy of the German Christian Democrats, reiterated the importance of stability promotion. Furthermore, he argued that "[f]or the eastward enlargement and the EU's eastern neighbourhood", that mainly meant "taking Russia into consideration". Schäuble warned that the EU "must strictly avoid giving the impression in Moscow that these processes are directed against Russian interests" (Bergdorfer Gesprächskreis, 2004: p. 72). Schäuble's argument however was not new, it was congruent to the unpublished Franco-German strategy paper of the year 2000 mentioned above. At the same conference in Lviv, MEP Toomas Ilves expressed his

anger at European foreign ministers, in this case Italy's Frattini, who he claimed to have a tendency of consulting the Russians before they allowed for any actions to be taken in the CIS (ibid, p. 52). Even Commission official Danuta Hübner sounded surprisingly realist when she exclaimed that the European Neighbourhood Policy should take into account the "balance of power between the Russian giant and Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova" (ibid., p. 89). All this indicates that the Russia factor has impacted on the EU's policy in the WNIS in general and towards Belarus in particular. It is noteworthy that this "enduring obsolete mindset", as critics have coined the Russia factor, is not merely present in the realist discourse surrounding NATO, but also amongst EU decision-makers (Zurawski, 2005: p. 91). The reasons, for the EU's fear of endangering its relations with Russia are multiple and have been discussed at length elsewhere. The Russia factor significantly hampers if not rules out value diffusion in Belarus.

Explaining why there have been limited and sporadic actions

It would, however, be somewhat careless not to briefly touch upon the second model's key deficiency – the problem of how to explain the EU's limited actions, however sporadic they may have been. A Machiavellian line of argument might hold that whilst it is of little significance whether a state acts according to moral virtues, it is important that it seems as if it acts according to them. A more sophisticated approach could however make use of Frank Schimmelfennig's concept of a "community trap", which he uses to analyse the EU's expansion to East Central Europe (Schimmelfennig, 2005: p. 142).

According to Schimmelfennig's notion, norm-based actions are not a mere façade, but the consequence of a bargaining process, in which actors may reveal inconsistencies between a community's normative catalogue and its actions and use these contradictions to argue for more norm-based policies. As the European Union would lose its credibility if it allowed a considerable mismatch between its official declarations as a democratising force and its actual policies, there have been some limited actions towards Lukashenka's Belarus, enthusiastically pointed to by officials once critics question the Union's role. As in the case of Belarus, the proponents of a more active engagement have been few in the EU-15 and the EU's approach has been dominated by the Westphalian agenda, value-based actions have remained scarce. However, with the 2004 wave of accessions the European Union has become a direct neighbour of Belarus. As some of the new members are more active towards Belarus and critical towards Russia's presence, the turn towards value-diffusion is not impossible. However, as long as the big member states prioritise relations with Russia and the southern member states lobby for more engagement in the Mediterranean region, the chances look somewhat bleak.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even if the observation that "Russia and the EU are fighting over spheres of influence" (Rahr, 2004: p. 5) is correct and the "shared neighbourhood" has indeed been turning into an "economic and diplomatic battlefield"

(Löwenhardt, 2005: p. 7), this does not seem to account for Belarus. The European Union seems to respect Russia's post-imperial orbit. Although there have been some limited punishments, combined with public denunciations, the EU has not opened its repertoire of incentives in order to induce Belarus nor has it consistently opted for a hard-line strategy of regime change. To put it bluntly, the EU has neither principally acted to promote its values, nor has it been toothless. The Union has achieved its goal of stability by means of inertia. Belarus and its population have not only fallen under authoritarian rule, but have additionally fallen hostage to the EU's Westphalian aspirations.

In the case of the EU's policies towards Belarus, the more realist-based second model seems more efficient at unearthing the underlying power-structures. The model of toothless value diffusion not only legitimates the EU's policies towards Belarus by excusing their "failure", but also lacks evidence for its underlying claims. Most importantly, it is incapable of explaining the lack of a clear involvement.

Critics are sure to respond that it was the EU's complexity and internal balance of power, not its Westphalian agenda that obstructed value diffusion towards the dictatorship in Minsk. Of course, particularistic interests of single Member States and even institutions have played a role in the defeat of those forces willing to proceed with a policy of engagement. Such developments are, however, central to any national foreign policy process and resemble the fights between various ministries and lobby groups over certain policy issues. They should not impede a sober view: the EU as a whole has not engaged in Belarus.

The EU's non-engagement is a disenchantment to those who had heralded the arrival of a primarily normative actor in international politics. The European Union, as this study has revealed, is guided by a set of interests somewhat comparable to those of Westphalian states. This is the case despite the EU's institutional structure *sui generis* and its continued existence as a military pigmy. This article urges academia to approach the EU with a more critical distance. Whilst it is not difficult to find a critical account of US, Chinese, British, or Russian foreign policy, the European Union seems to have been spared the discomfort of an academic cross-examination. If the ideal of a European Union as a diffuser of cosmopolitan values and prosperity is at all to be upheld, academia must systematically lay open the Union's contemporary attempts to acquire a Westphalian agenda. Such a step would provide the necessary foundation for an unadulterated normative foreign policy, one that engages in Europe's last dictatorship and beyond.

ENDNOTES

¹ An anonymous author coined Europe's new dividing line a "'golden curtain' because it separates the wealthier countries, or countries that are 'making it' into the ranks of the affluent [...] from those who are also-rans or mired in poverty and underdevelopment" (Anonymous, 2002, p. 175).

² The term is used here to denote the sum of the EU institutions' (in) actions in the areas of trade, aid and security policy, but also incorporates the foreign policies of the member states.

³ This article considers contributions written in English and in German on the EU's policies towards

Belarus and towards the Western Newly Independent States (WNIS).

- ⁴ This approach is marked by some overlap but not by congruence with Sandra Lavanex's "inclusion versus exclusion" distinction, she uses to position the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Lavanex, 2005.
- ⁵ Although this category could potentially include other European states that gained independence after the demise of Soviet communism, the term WNIS has become a label for the group consisting of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.
- ⁶ Also known as the democratic peace theory. *For a realist critique see*: Layne, 1994.
- ⁷ Gromadzki, Silitiski and Vesely claim that the EU should coordinate its policies with those of the United States, as "both actors have as their final goal the democratisation of Belarus" (Gromadzki et al, 2005).
- ⁸ Translation by the author.
- ⁹ Some authors leave out the step of explicitly coining the EU's policy a failure, but proceed to explaining the Union's lack of success.
- ¹⁰ The Belarusian foreign ministry claims that Belarus' economic output has risen to 116% of the Soviet level, which would be a significant rise, given the numbers in Russia (85%) and Ukraine (60%). Data provided by Charles Grant and Mark Leonard, 2006.
- ¹¹ Such as Council official de Sousa (Development and Peace Foundation, 2005, p. 15),

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