

# Both an EU Partner and Russia's Satellite? – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Two of the main events in Belarus' diplomatic life in May were China's president's visit to Minsk and Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership summit – both of which have fitted well into Minsk' foreign policy priorities.

These priorities include developing alternatives to Russia's dominant role in the economic and security arenas and strengthening the country's economic viability through increasing exports and attracting investment.

The Belarusian authorities have largely managed to break free from their diplomatic isolation from Europe over the course of the past year. The joint declaration adopted at the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga includes several positive references to Belarus. They lay the ground for continued dialogue between Belarus and the West, which will include human rights issues, on the eve of the presidential election.

## Austria and Hungary in Focus

On 4 May, Sebastian Kurz, the world's youngest foreign minister, came to Minsk from Austria on a working visit. Welcoming the Austrian minister, Belarusian president [Alexander Lukashenka](#) explained the reasons for Austria's strategy of maintaining closer relations with Belarus than most of its European partners. In the Belarusian ruler's opinion, the West has designated "curators" of former Soviet republics after the breakup of the USSR. Belarus fell into Austria's "zone of responsibility" and apparently has remained there ever since.

While this "sharing of responsibilities" may be a figment of Lukashenka's inventive mind, Vienna indeed has long been seeking closer economic ties with Minsk. During the last ten years, Austria has remained among the top five investors in the Belarusian economy, with annual investment varying within a range of \$500,000 – 1mn. Some aspects of bilateral business, however, have led to [scandals](#) in Austria a few years back.

Hungary's foreign minister Péter Szijjártó visited Minsk a week earlier, on 28 – 29 April. While he was not lucky enough to meet with the Belarusian head of state, the top Hungarian diplomat held extensive talks with his counterpart [Vladimir Makei](#). Péter Szijjártó has long been a driving force behind Hungary's [Eastern Opening](#) strategy, which has greatly facilitated the expansion of ties between Belarus and Hungary.

Hungary's foreign minister: The EU must reward Belarus for its stability and role in the Minsk agreements

Minsk and Budapest agreed on a five-point action plan to expand cooperation in trade, investment and education. The two strongmen-led countries also share many conservative values, in particular, on [safeguarding traditional family values](#) and favouring interventionist policies with their economies.

Returning home from Minsk, Péter Szijjártó spoke out in favour of the EU changing its attitude towards Belarus and establishing close cooperation with Minsk in order to reward Belarus for its stability and the significant role it has played with the Minsk agreements.

Over the last month, Belarusian diplomats also held meetings in Minsk and other European capitals with senior-level diplomats from Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, and Sweden.

# Partnering with Europe

Besides bilateral issues, most meetings with European diplomats have focused on Belarus' forthcoming participation in the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. Vladimir Makei also travelled to Luxembourg on 20 April and Bratislava on 15 May to discuss preparations for the summit with fellow ministers.

Both Europe and Belarus regarded the Eastern Partnership summit as an opportunity to strengthen various positive dynamics already in play with regards to their relations. While most European countries were psychologically [ready to see Lukashenka coming to Riga](#), the Belarusian leader decided that the time was not yet ripe and sent Makei in his stead.

Some observers have interpreted Belarus' refusal to join in the quasi-unanimous condemnation of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in the summit's final document as evidence of Minsk's support of Russia's aggression and the insincerity of Belarus' rapprochement with Europe.

Belarus actively participated in an event, which Moscow sees as anti-Russian

It would be foolish, however, to expect Minsk to endorse a language that would openly condemn its closest ally and sponsor. In fact, Minsk failed to prevent the inclusion of a rephrased reference to the illegal annexation of Crimea in the summit's declaration, though it could easily sabotage its joint adoption.

The very fact of Belarus' participation in an event, which a senior Russian diplomat called "negative", and its continued status as an EU partner at a time of very strained relations between Russia and Europe is very telling when one considers Belarus' true intentions. This is also true of [Lukashenka's recent visit to Georgia](#), a country that has severed its diplomatic ties with Russia.

[The summit's joint declaration](#) highlights participating countries' appreciation of "the contribution of Belarus in facilitating negotiations" in the Ukraine crisis and welcomes "the steps taken in EU-Belarus relations". It also welcomes Belarus' accession to the Bologna Process and its initiative on a digital economy.

## **Prioritising Asia and the MENA region**

China's president Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Belarus on 10 – 12 May. This was the first trip from China's dignitary to the country, one whom rarely receives the world leaders.

Does China need Belarus to conduct trade with Europe?

Alexander Lukashenka outdid himself with his signs of hospitality that he extended to China's "paramount leader". The Belarusian authorities jumped at this opportunity to lure more Chinese investment into the country and get Beijing interested in importing more Belarusian goods.

The leaders of the two countries exchanged many compliments and signed numerous agreements paving the way to expanded economic cooperation. [Some experts have expressed doubts](#) about the strength of these agreements, particularly regarding China's genuine interest in Belarus' exaggerated offer of becoming a China's gateway to Europe.

Later in May, Alexander Lukashenka received parliamentary leaders from two Southeast Asian nations. On 22 May, Khin Aung Myint, the speaker of the upper house of Myanmar's parliament and a former general, agreed to Lukashenka's proposal to focus on a few priority areas. Belarus seeks to sell agricultural, mining and [military equipment](#) to this "discipline-flourishing democracy", as well as to train its military and civilian personnel.

On 25 May, the Belarusian president and Irman Gusman, the speaker of the regional chamber of Indonesia's parliament, discussed ways to radically increase the trade turnover between two countries, which now stands at about \$215m. Belarus want to stake on establishing joint ventures of Belarusian mechanical engineering corporations in Indonesia. For his part, Irman Gusman promised to lobby an expeditious opening of an Indonesian embassy in Minsk.

In late April and May, deputy foreign minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) visited Mongolia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia and talked to a delegation from Iraqi Kurdistan in Minsk and his colleague [Alexander Mikhnevich](#) received a delegation from Oman. In all instances, diplomats paid primary attention to trade and economic cooperation.

Expanding Belarus' presence in new and less developed markets and maintaining positive dynamics in relations with the West, without alarming Russia, are set to remain Belarus' foreign policy priorities in the months preceding the forthcoming presidential election.

---

## Why Ukraine Failed to Revolutionize Belarus

Given the numerous ties which link Belarus to Ukraine, one might expect the radical political changes in Ukraine to revolutionise Belarus. Yet political activity in Belarus is barely noticeable, despite dramatic developments in Ukraine and the forthcoming presidential election.

Last month, political scientist Tatiana Chyzhova published the results of a monitoring project that reviewed protests in

2014. According to her, public political acts, be they protests or other events, remained few and far between and were ill-attended. In fact, the level of street-level political acts in Belarus was eight times lower than the period preceding Maidan in Ukraine.

Even Belarusian opposition politicians like Pavel Seviarynets who actively advocated for street protests in the past have recently said that calling on Belarusian youth to engage into politics is basically the equivalent of inviting them to stick their fingers into an electrical socket.

At the moment, Ukrainian events have most influenced Belarusian politics through the widespread use of Ukrainian symbols and rhetoric by the Belarusian opposition, but little else.

### **No Time for Street Protests?**

Chyzhova, who works at the Institute for Political Studies “Political Sphere”, counted a total of 81 protests last year in Belarus. That is slightly more than in 2013, when 64 protests were held. This spike in protests was largely due to the local elections held in March 2014 – and if one sets aside the election campaigns, picketing and other social protests – there were only 52 political acts or events.

Most of these actions involved a small number of people and only four events were attended by more than 100 people.

All in all, the study posits that protest-related activity in Belarus in 2014 was eight times lower than in Ukraine, before Maidan. This is just more evidence that Ukrainian-style political change in Belarus is improbable.

Last year, the authorities issued permits for only seven out of a total 52 political events

Many factors have contributed to the low level of activity with regards to street-level politics in the country – mistakes by the opposition, the absence of efficient political organisations, an ideological and methodological crisis among opponents of the current government, and the poor state of the media landscape.

The government has also done their part to prevent people from taking to the streets. Last year, the authorities issued permits for only seven out of a total 52 political events. 33 of 52 political actions ended with some negative consequences for the organisers, be it administrative arrests, fines, detentions or some form of warning.

### **Ukraine Does Not Inspire Ordinary Belarusians**

17 of these political events dealt with developments in neighbouring Ukraine and 13 of them were pro-Maidan, while four were expressly anti-Maidan. Solidarity with Ukraine has [even galvanised football fans](#) to engage in politics – probably for the first time in Belarusian history.

A collective photo of Belarusian fans supporting Ukrainian comrades and a flash-mob of support for Ukraine at a football match raised concerns among the Belarusian authorities who were well aware of the role that Ukrainian football fans played in toppling the Yanukovich government in Kyiv.

The opposition community enthusiastically welcomed the radical shift in power in Ukraine and stood behind the new Kyiv government as the war in Eastern Ukraine unfolded, something which the opposition is very eager to demonstrate. Even traditional Belarusian mass rallies unrelated to Ukrainian events and dedicated to specific historical dates (like 25 March) have featured numerous Ukrainian flags.

Some activists have uncritically emulated the revolutionary Ukrainian demonstrations. For instance, last year “Young Front” publicly displayed a banner praising Ukrainian

nationalist fighters, among them Roman Shukhevych, despite, however, his active participation in Nazi atrocities in Belarus in WWII. Resorting to such dubious figures was akin to the opposition shooting itself in the foot in the eyes of the public.

the Ukrainian tragedy has influenced Belarusian society by making it even more cautious in its attitudes towards possible political changes

The Chairman of the Belarusian People's Front Party (PBNF) Alyaksei Yanukevich finally reacted to this politically suicidal behaviour before this year's Freedom Day (25 March). He asked the activists to not bring the portraits of Ukrainian nationalists and banners like "Death to Russian Occupiers!" Yanukevich also emphasised the importance of having more Belarusian than Ukrainian flags at Belarusian rallies. Correct as his point may be, unfortunately, the political damage had already been done.

After all, the Ukrainian tragedy has influenced Belarusian society by making it even more cautious in its attitudes towards possible political changes and even more sensitive to any allusions and parallels with Ukraine. Even before the conflict broke out in Eastern Ukraine, 78% of respondents told the Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Research that a better future was "not worth bloodshed". Seventy percent said they did not want a Ukrainian-style revolution. The pervasiveness of this attitude only grows stronger as time goes on.

### **Fake as Mainstream**

Of course, Belarus is not immune to Ukrainian influence. Much of this political influence has a rather destructive character as they lead to the growth of extremist groups of both pro- and anti-Russian inclinations, neither of which are much engaged in the fight for democracy. A case in point is the

participation of well-known Russian neo-Nazis from Belarus – like Sergei Korotkikh – in the war in the Donbas.

Many activists of all political stripes and colours are also trying to import ideas to push their positions in the confrontation between pro-Russian and pro-Western elements into Belarus. Two remarkable media stories stand out in particular. Both involve ludicrous accusations and both were reported by authoritative individuals or organisations and turned out to be blatantly false, though no one admitted their guilt.

The first story, from last September, regards wild Belarusian nationalists allegedly brutalising a small child for his wearing Saint George's ribbon – a sign widely abused today by Russian official propaganda. Tut.by, Belarus's largest internet portal ran the story. This fabricated bit of news, however, has never been followed-up and no complaint has been filed with the police by the mother of this unknown child.

The second story was about an alleged incident where a girl in the centre of Minsk had her hair violently cut off by Russian tourists last April. A well-known activist Andrei Kim promoted this story, despite the fact that there has been absolutely zero confirmation of the events described.

Despite the general tranquillity of Belarusian society, proof of which can be found in nearly every successive sociological study, it could become impossible to avoid some violence spilling over from a neighbouring country.

The government will respond by resorting to even harsher measures should anything happen in Belarus. The consequences could be disastrous. A similar situation in the 1990s contributed a great deal to the transformation of another post-Soviet country, Uzbekistan, into a brutal regime. Tashkent then fenced off the war in Tajikistan by persecuting every member of the opposition inside Uzbekistan, cutting ties

to neighbouring countries and building up a huge repressive apparatus.

Belarus, for its part, will never endure this level of repression and isolation. Yet the clampdown on the opposition and every public activity after some kind of provocation – which might not even be linked to the opposition – is a likely future possible scenario.

---

## **Fears of Economic Turmoil, Banking Sector Problems – Belarus Economy Digest**

According to the press release published by International Monetary Fund on 19 May the possible losses for the Belarusian economy in 2015 will amount 2.3 per cent of the GDP and \$2bn of its foreign exchange reserves.

The consequences of the economic crisis in Belarus have multiplied and more problems are on their way.

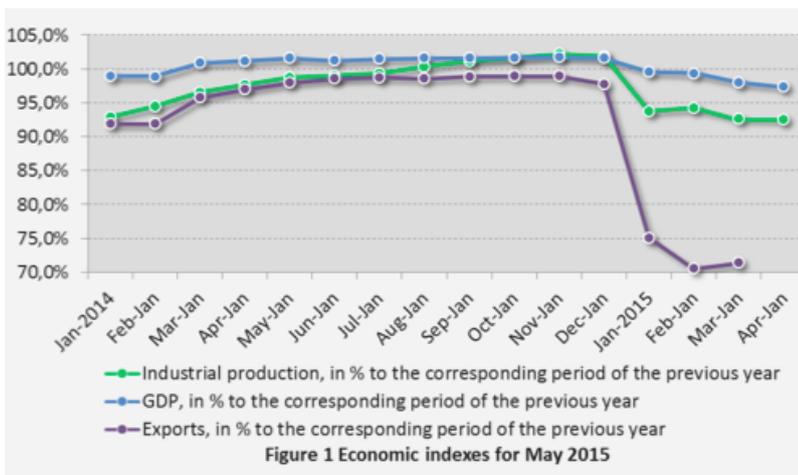
The intensification of economic relations with China suggests that a simple solution could be improving the status of manufacturing and increasing the economy's competitiveness.

However, several questions remain: how to use any loans effectively, taking into account the criteria that any deals with China stipulate that most of the spending finds its way back to China, and how not to expose the most savoury sectors of the Belarusian economy to the ferocity of the Chinese dragon.

Beyond this, the banking sector shows warning signs. One troubling indicator is the National Bank's recent move to recall the licences of several commercial banks.

## Belarusian Economy: the Great Slowdown

Belarus's economic figures for May have, to put it mildly, been disappointing. According to data published on 19 May, the economy is dealing with a number of serious issues. Nearly all of the primary economic indicators are in a downward spiral. For one, GDP has dipped by 2.6 per cent (see figure 1). Foreign direct investment fell by 37.6 per cent over the course of a year. Manufacturing is not providing the same kinds of profits that it once did with industrial output decreasing by 7.5 per cent.



The economy is also suffering from rising levels of indebtedness, which has recently climbed by 40.9 per cent. Retail sales have also slowed down: growth is sitting at 1.3 per cent, a sad figure when compared to the same period from a year ago, when it was considerably stronger at 12.8 per cent. This sends a disappointing signal for the emergence of consumption as a driver of growth.

A stronger Belarusian ruble and weak Russian demand have

squeezed exports by 28.6 per cent over the course of a year. The number of people that are officially registered as unemployed skyrocketed 73.1 per cent as of the end of March 2015 when compared to the same period of 2014. Foreign exchange reserves have dropped by \$238.1m.

Belarus now faces significant risks with a potential long-term slowdown in economic growth. Contrary to expectations, this sluggishness has emerged not necessarily as a result of the crisis unfolding in Russia, but rather due to the economy's virtually exhausted overall competitiveness.

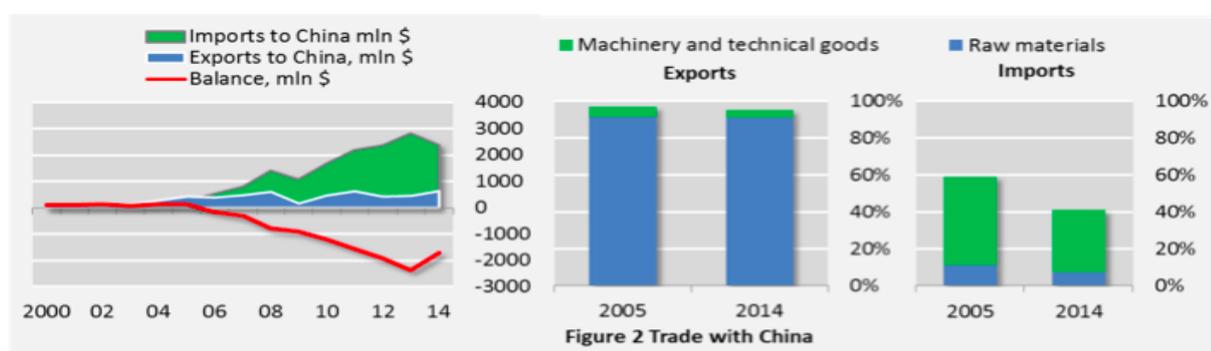
Only through improvements in productivity and greater savings and investment are capable of breathing some fresh air into the economy. But according to the available economic indicators, the economy has yet to find a way to emerge from under the waves: productivity has decreased by 1.1 per cent and investment in fixed capital has dropped 5.9 per cent as of the end of April 2015 over the past year.

Rather than waiting for the situation to improve on its own, the government should remove all barriers currently holding Belarus back. The agricultural and IT-sector, for example, have much to offer.

## **Diversifying Belarus: In China We Trust**

The nearly complete economic dependence on Russia and its interrelated industries has basically condemned Belarus to enduring its most recent economic decline. Though Russia is also suffering from losses (its GDP dropped 2.2 per cent in the first quarter of 2015), it still possesses so-called 'knowledge industries' (a vibrant service economy) that have restored its strength. Belarus has practically no trumps in its hand to play and, therefore, the new government has prioritised diversification, first and foremost with China..

Nevertheless, the past ten years of cooperation with powerhouse Chinese economy has provided almost negligible results for Belarus. Exports have seen only a slight increase, but while imports have grown considerably. As a result the trade balance from 2005 to the present has amounted to a \$-1.7bn decline. Furthermore, the structure of trade has also transformed in an adverse manner. In 2005 Belarus has purchased approximately 40 per cent of consumer goods, but today its share has increased almost 60 per cent in total imports from China (see figure 2).



In May Belarus took several steps to speed up its trade and investment relationships with China. On 11 May 2015, during the Belarusian-Chinese Inter-regional Business Forum, the Minister of Economy of Belarus Uladzimir Zinouski announced that Beijing would provide more than \$7bn (\$3bn in the form of preferential loans, and another \$4bn as a commercial loan) to Belarusian banks to finance business projects, including infrastructure development, and in support of small and medium-size businesses.

According to Zinouski China will additionally provide a special grant of 800m yuan in the form of technical assistance for various social projects. After negotiations on 10 May with Chinese officials, both parties approved 20 agreements and memorandums that will allegedly double mutual trade, promote the exchange of technologies and increase the share of scientific and technical innovations.

Nevertheless, the prospects of the successful implementation

of these agreements [seem unclear](#), especially when one takes into account the past experiences Belarus when dealing with countries like Iran and Venezuela.

Governmental representatives have tried to define how to follow China's lead with regards to its astounding economic growth, as well as deploying its advanced manufacturing, especially in electronics. However, to replicate China's path towards prosperity, Belarus requires three of China's prominent advantages: low-cost manufacturing, the comprehensive automation of industry, and an excellent (and improving) infrastructure.

## **Banking Sector: More Serious Issues Arising**

In April the National Bank extended the period of time to increase the profitability of operational activities, first of all with the short-term difference between loans granted and deposits attracted, of Trastbank, BTA Bank, and Bank BBMB.

Additionally, the national regulator has prolonged its decision to restrict TK-Bank's operations with deposits (cash assets provided to the bank in order to gain interest profit) of individuals and legal entities, on issuing of warranties and plastic cards, and on trusts' management of assets.

In May the National Bank also ended the licences of the Nord European Bank, InterPayBank, BIT-Bank, Evrobank, and N.E.B Bank due to their failure to comply with the imposed requirements on normative capital value (\$25m) and the uncertainty of prospects for their build-up.

Similar events occurred in 2011, when currency devaluation hit the Belarusian economy, and as a result eleven banks experienced the similar problems, with three banks nearly being nearly liquidated altogether. But, today's problems

differ from 2011, as banks' difficulties are associated, first of all, with the improper regulation of the currency market; in 2015 problems have arose from exporters and their inability to repay their debts.

On the whole, the economy is continuing to decline endangering the stability of the banking sector, declining competitiveness and the pressure being applied to the National Bank to soften its monetary policy to strengthen the industrial sector and exports.

*Aleh Mazol, Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC)*

*This article is a part of a joint project between Belarus Digest and Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC)*

---

## **Peppa Pig Now In Belarusian, Forum of Entrepreneurs, Quote Your Own! – Belarus Civil Society Digest**

A popular cartoon Peppa Pig now in Belarusian – thanks to the crowdfunding platform Talakosht, the organisers collected money for audio dubbing.

Recently launched cultural project Quote your own! will gather the best examples of Belarusian thought. City Without Barriers contest aims to create an accessible environment for people with disabilities for their full participation in society.

All this and more in this edition of Belarus Civil Society Digest.

## Civil Society Activities

[Peppa Pig is successful in crowdfunding](#). Funds for audio dubbing in Belarusian of the first season of a cartoon Peppa Pig have been collected; the first series is available online. In less than a month, via the crowdfunding platform [Talakosht](#), the project collected almost 43 million rubles (about \$3,000). Initially, the project team planned to collect \$2,600 for audio dubbing of the first season of 50 episodes. But successful crowdfunding allows organisers to hope that they will collect the money for at least one more season.

[More than 1,000 people participated in the global clean up action Zrobim!](#) On 16 May Belarus joined the global action Let's do it! (Zrobim! in Belarusian) – for one day, the participants removed about 100m<sup>3</sup> of garbage. The action took place in 24 Belarus' cities; the participants cleared about 40 dumps across the country, which were pre-mapped on the special web site.

[Quote Your Own! project launched](#). On 21 May a number of CSOs and educational institutions announced a new cultural project *Quote Your Own!* The project aims to actualise the best samples of the Belarusian thought. Among the initiators are Flying University, EuroBelarus Consortium, Belarusian Collegium, Mova Nanova language courses, Budzma campaign. The quotes will be placed at the [Budzma website](#). Everyone is welcome to participate and send his/her favourite quotes by Belarusian authors.

[Equal Opportunities new nomination](#) has been established by HR-Brand Award in cooperation with the DisRight Office. The award aims to encourage employers who provide adequate working conditions for people with disabilities. The [Accessibility](#)

[Week](#) held in April 2015, showed that Belarusian companies have a related positive experience that should be demonstrated to other companies. For instance, in the first quarter of 2015, 2,000 marked job positions were registered on the [RABOTA.TUT.BY](#) that is by 40% more compared with the previous year.

## **Seminars, Conferences and Workshops**

[Minsk hosted the Forum of Entrepreneurs](#) organised by the Perspektiva CSO on 18 May. The Forum brought together about 250 participants, which is significantly less than in the previous [forum in February](#), held on the eve of the entry into force of the Decree on certificates for selling light industry goods. This time entrepreneurs asked the authorities for a 5-year moratorium on inspections.

[Territorial marketing and branding international festival OPEN](#) will take place on 4-6 June in Minsk. The OPEN Festival is a unique opportunity to attend workshop sessions of world-known brand gurus in the sphere of country marketing and branding. Participants are guaranteed to obtain new ideas and an opportunity to make their names known to the whole world. Among the organisers are SATIO Group of Companies, Professional Marketing Association of Belarus.

[Online magazine Idea organized a public lecture of an analyst of Euromonitor International company](#), Olga Murogava. In her lecture 'Self-Amazon: How to build an innovative trade in Belarus' Olga Murogava taught about the latest trends in retail and trade and their impact on business in Belarus. The lecture was held on 22 May at the Minsk business club Imaguru.

['Minsk after Riga: Forum on the reforms, or How Belarus can adapt and develop in new regional contexts'](#) international conference will take place on 28-29 May in Minsk. The Conference organizers are BISS and the Latvian Embassy in Belarus. The opening session provides participation of

representatives of the Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian expert community. The online broadcasting will be organised at the BISS website.

### [Film School Studio by Andrei Polupanov and Superheroes School](#)

invite to a 4-day workshop under the guidance of a renowned Polish TV producer Paweł Kwaśniewski. The participants will learn how to properly shoot high quality video and make money online on their creative activity. The practical part includes shooting comedy mini-series about one of the Minsk deprived areas and young people. The organisers are collecting funds for the workshop and the mini-series via the crowdfunding platform Ulej.by.

## Research

[Sustainable development as a science](#). On 13 May the Office for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC) together with the Scientific and Technical Library conducted a scientific cafe, presenting the latest researches in the field of sustainable development, as well as in regional and local development in Belarus. The video bridge connected nearly 50 researchers and presented six thematic studies. The event took place within the [Sustainable Development Week 2015](#).

[New Eurasia Establishment calls for applications](#) of pilot areas under the project 'Expanding economic opportunities in rural Belarus'. The project aims to involve partnerships of local authorities, CSOs and citizens' initiatives in economic development and improving the quality of life in rural areas. At least 9 rural areas will be selected and become the pilot demonstration sites for sustainable economic development. Applications are accepted until 7 June. On 29-30 May under the project, the New Eurasia holds a thematic [conference](#).

[Egalite Center invites to a public presentation](#) of the results of a pilot educational project Egalite Media Workshop on 28 May. During the week, the first floor of the Business Club

Imaguru will be put for an exhibition of socially oriented photo projects. Egalite Media Workshop is an inclusive training program on citizen journalism and social filmmaking for ordinary young people and young people with fewer opportunities (with disabilities).

## Interaction Between State and Civil Society

[City Without Barriers competition launched](#). The contest aims to create an accessible environment for people with disabilities for their full participation in society. The organiser is the Minsk municipality with organisational and methodological support of the DisRight Office. The competition is held for the first time. All Minsk new and reconstructed facilities of 2013-2015 are invited to participate.

[BCD was denied a possibility to hold the registration Congress indoors](#). The Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCD) is organising its registration congress on 13 June in Minsk. This will be BCD's fifth attempt to get state registration. Thirteen BCD's applications to various organisations in Minsk with a request to rent a conference hall were answered with refusals. Respectively, BCD plans to hold the Congress on Svaboda square in the centre of Minsk.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

---

# Belarus-China Relations: More Hype than Substance?

On 10-12 May, Chinese president Xi Jinping capped off his Eurasia trip with a visit to Minsk. As during his prior stops in Kazakhstan and Russia, the Chinese leader was sizing up the opportunities, as well as the risks, of deepening ties with countries in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Over the past two decades, Belarus has achieved a high level of confidence in its political relations with China, mainly through international support for China's policies. Squeezed between the EU and Russia, Belarus has sought to strengthen ties with a third power to gain greater independence in its foreign relations. However, economically speaking, Belarus has little to offer to China other than potash fertilisers.

## A "Historic" Visit to Belarus

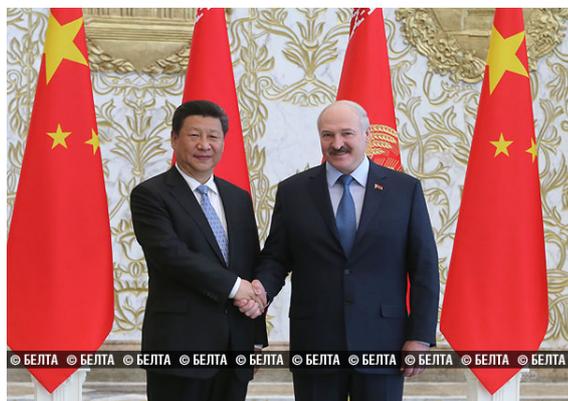
When Xi's presidential plane landed in Minsk, the Belarusian media was quick to call the visit "historic," marking a new epoch in Belarus-China relations. No high-level Chinese leader has visited Belarus since 2001. Needless to say, President Lukashenka personally greeted and saw off President Xi at the airport.

The countries signed a number of agreements, which include Chinese investment in Belarusian railroads, industrial enterprises, and Big Stone, a [Belarusian-Chinese industrial park](#). The Chinese leader also suggested that Belarus participates in China's New Silk Road, an ambitious project to upgrade the transport and communications infrastructure connecting China to Europe.

Among the usual diplomatic niceties about friendship and

cooperation, Xi commended the important role Lukashenka has played in working toward peace in Ukraine, "which was highly praised by the international community."

Of course, Xi was not in Minsk simply to compliment to Lukashenka.



Aliaksandr Filipaŭ, a former Asia analyst at the Presidential Analytical Centre in Minsk, told Belarus Digest that Xi Jinping had a few hidden items on his agenda.

First and foremost, he was examining how trade integration was proceeding under the Eurasian Economic Union between Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus, and whether China stands to gain or lose from it.

Xi also wanted to assess whether the economic downturn in Belarus might harm the projects that China has financed through export credits. Not least, Xi was eager to secure long-term contracts at cheap prices for Belarusian potash fertiliser, a critical input for China's large farm sector. China is the world's top consumer of agrochemicals and potash fertilizer. China is even exploring the possibility of acquiring Belaruskali, Belarus's potash extraction and export giant.

From Minsk's perspective, Xi's visit afforded a unique opportunity to show that Belarus can successfully pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy, and that it has the stature to

host world leaders. In particular, Lukashenka seeks to demonstrate to Belarus's neighbouring powers, Russia and the EU, that his country can increase its room for diplomatic manoeuvre. All the while, the government prevented the Belarusian media from publishing any critical analysis of China's commercial contracts and interests in Belarus.

## High Politics and Poor Business

Despite a long history of mutual visits, it was only after 2006 that China became a foreign policy priority for Belarus. At the time, Russia announced its plans to significantly raise the price of oil and gas exports to Belarus. China was fast becoming a global superpower and an alternative partner to the West, making it the most suitable candidate to balance Russia's influence.

China was reluctant to engage Belarus economically because of the country's Soviet-style management culture and lack of a market economy

To draw the Asian power's attention, Belarus actively [supported the One China policy](#), as well as other Chinese policies, in the international arena. China returned the favour by condemning interference in Belarus' internal affairs, in the face of Western critics of Lukashenka's undemocratic politics.

Another goal of cooperating with China, to receive ample investments and cheap loans, proved [far more difficult to achieve](#). Adhering to a pragmatic foreign policy, China felt it was enough to offer political support to Belarus. Chinese diplomats apparently told their western colleagues in the mid-2000s that they were reluctant to engage Belarus economically because of the country's Soviet-style management culture and lack of a market economy. To this day, Chinese FDI in Belarus remain very low, a sober reflection of China's

lukewarm attitude.

Belarusian media like to report huge figures for Chinese loans, and often misconstrue them as "investments." The reports never mention that most of these deals originate with the Export-Import Bank of China, which offers export financing for Chinese goods and services. Under the terms of such loans, the general share of Chinese equipment, works and services is to be no less than 50% of the value of project financing. Such projects may modernise Belarusian industry, but they raise many questions in terms of economic expediency.

For a long time, Belarusian official propaganda has exaggerated Belarus' importance for China, referring to Belarusian-Chinese relations as a "strategic partnership," the highest level of relations in the hierarchy of Chinese foreign policy. However, the Chinese themselves agreed to this formula only in 2013. According to a 2007 cable leaked out of the US Embassy in Minsk, Chinese Deputy Ambassador Jiang Xiaoyang described Belarus-China relations as having "more hype than substance."

The false image of cooperation largely targets a domestic audience, as well as constituting a veiled threat to Russia that Belarus is capable of establishing alternative alliances.

## **Does Belarus Have Anything to Offer China?**

The problem for Belarus in its relationship with China is that it cannot offer any significant projects for investment. Lukashenka has promoted his country as a gateway to both the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU, but this rhetoric lacks practical meaning. China established strategic partnerships with the EU and Russia long before Belarus and has external trade turnover of around \$500 billion with EU and \$90 billion with Russia, but only \$4 billion with Belarus.



But Chinese companies remain reluctant to invest in Belarus because of its poor business environment and Soviet-style management culture, and the actual level of Chinese FDI in Belarus remains extremely low.

Although the Belarusian media has reported billions of dollars worth of contracts, the reports fail to mention that China only offers loans and investments that are tied to procurement of goods and services from China.

According to Filipaŭ, Belarus currently has nothing to offer China but potash. Conversely, the New Silk Road, which Xi has offered Belarus to join, hardly concerns Belarus at all. It primarily targets the development of China's western regions, and its economic feasibility remains in doubt.

The Big Stone Industrial Park, the largest and most promising joint initiative, risks faltering due to red tape and poor management. Technologically, Belarus lags decades behind China. There may be room to cooperate on military technology, but both countries receive much of this technology from Russia already.

Belarus needs China's help across the board – diplomacy, capital, and technology. China is beginning to oblige, but will move forward with caution. In the meantime, a niche area for bilateral cooperation is in information technologies that facilitate government control. As its recent actions show, Minsk is prone to control and censor the Internet. More likely than not, China, a fellow authoritarian regime, will be happy

to share its ample experiences in digital repression.

---

# **Minsk Dialogue Non-Paper: Another Yalta is Impossible**

The organisers of the [Minsk Dialogue conference](#) in Minsk (Liberal Club and the Ostrogorski Centre) released the non-paper timed for the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit which will take place in Riga on 21-22 May 2015.

The non-paper results from intensive discussions between experts from European Union, Russia and Eastern Partnership countries in Minsk and subsequent due diligence efforts.

The non-paper starts by analysing the reasons for the regional divide in the European Union and Russian shared neighbourhood, discusses the reasons why communication between major regional actors failed and the need for new channels of communication in the region bases, including increased communication on micro-level and within the expert community.

## **Regional Divide: Nature and Challenges**

1. The post-Soviet fragmentation poses numerous regional risks, which are daunting against the background of the geopolitical escalation in Eastern Europe.

2. Lack of communication across dividing lines, between the West and Russia, further strengthens the pre-existing deficit of trust among regional actors and stakeholders. As a result,

all the relevant actors place the Ukraine crisis in their own domestic contexts, often without taking into account the bigger picture.

3. The Eastern Partnership, in contrast to the European Neighbourhood Policy, was originally perceived by Moscow as a project that threatens Russia's interests. With the progress of the association negotiations between the European Union and several partner countries, the Eastern Partnership acquired the character of a geopolitical struggle. After this, conflict became unavoidable.

4. The geopolitical struggle already turned into the driving force behind the accelerated Eurasian integration. As a result, in less than five years the project formally passed through three stages: from a customs union to a common economic space to an economic union. However, a number of fundamental issues remained unaddressed in the course of the integration process. In particular, the identity problem – on what values does the Eurasian integration rest? – has been neither discussed nor resolved. Technically speaking, of the four economic freedoms that the European Union espouses, only one of those – free movement of labour – fully operates in the Eurasian Economic Union.

5. As the European Union example suggests, true economic integration only works when countries pool sovereignty. In the case of the Eurasian Economic Union, integration institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Commission are dominated by Russia and important decisions are made at the national level. Due to these and other internal factors the Eurasian Economic Union has almost exhausted its potential for further enlargement.

6. Integration projects in the 'shared neighbourhood' (both EU- and Russia-driven) remain elite-centric. Thus, they lack societal cohesion and cause fragmentation at critical junctures. At the same time, recently societies in countries

with more liberal political regimes have emerged as a new factor in international relations. However, their role (and relations) with traditional political and diplomatic actors remains uncertain.

7. Under these circumstances, a choice between the East and West inevitably brings conflict and further polarizes societies in the shared neighbourhood.

8. The integration rationale of the 'in-between' countries is based on the idea of integration advantages (natural and financial resources, beneficial trade, and modernisation opportunities, etc). Ultimately, the states in the shared neighbourhood fear a USSR-like situation: domination of the centre without sufficient resources.

9. The role of the United States in the 'shared neighbourhood' is heavily exploited in propaganda but insufficiently addressed in diplomacy. A sustainable solution to the crisis requires an active engagement of all actors – EU, Russia, United States and the countries in question.

## **Bridging the Divide: Track-I**

10. Quick solutions to the problem of geopolitical escalation in Eastern Europe are unlikely to succeed, as regional tensions remain high and warring states are still determined to fight for their cause. Therefore, stopping hostilities in Donbas is of the utmost priority. No political settlement in Ukraine and in the region at large is possible beforehand.

11. Countries in the 'shared neighbourhood' should be important players on all matters of crisis resolution and post-crisis regional settlement. Small countries have levers and abilities to block some of the Great Powers' decisions. Hence, "another Yalta is impossible".

12. To be both viable and attractive, regional integration

projects need to fit into the constellation of international relations in eastern Europe that will emerge after the Ukraine crisis. At a minimum, they need to avoid strengthening dividing lines and provide the 'in-between' states with enough space for geopolitical and geo-economic complementarity. In the case of the Eastern Partnership, a double-track approach is emerging, as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have effectively formed an 'association league'. But the other three EaP countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – should not be isolated.

13. A sustainable security area in the shared neighbourhood cannot be built without Russia. Nor can Ukraine's economic problems be effectively addressed in the short term without Russia. Therefore, the European Union ignoring Moscow and vice versa is not helpful. Long-term regional solutions need to reflect the reality on the ground and incorporate decision-makers in the regions as well.

14. Confidence-building among regional actors and stakeholders is key to de-escalation in the shared neighbourhood. Intensified communication across dividing lines with a focus on technical, rather than geopolitical, issues should be prioritised.

15. The concept of a 'Greater Europe' from Lisbon to Vladivostok remains abstract, as it is not clear how conceptually valid it is without resolving the intractable Crimea problem. However, the idea of modernisation in the framework of a common economic area has potential to become a common denominator, but only in the longer run.

16. Depoliticised technical discussions about prospects for a common economic area between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union need to begin as confidence-building exercises and a contribution to future stability. They should not focus on the macro level only. The micro level (local and district public administrations, businesses, local

communities, cross-border cooperation etc.) is of crucial importance. Economically at least, the questions remain the same anyway: rule of law, quality of infrastructure, customs practices, administrative efficiency, business climate, etc.

## **Bridging the Divide: Track-II**

17. Against the backdrop of existing dividing lines and growing geopolitical escalation, a track-II dialogue is a crucial channel of communication and another pillar of confidence-building among actors and stakeholders in the region.

18. Minsk has demonstrated itself to be a suitable venue for such a dialogue due to its newly established status as neutral ground for negotiations to resolve the Ukraine crisis. It has the clear potential to attract experts from all countries in the region and has now been proven “fit” to host discussions about relations between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union – due to precedent, and perhaps more importantly, due to its unique status as an original member of both the Eurasian Economic Union and the Eastern Partnership.

19. A track-II platform in Minsk (the “Minsk Dialogue”) should organise regular meetings with a view to facilitating inclusive discussions about prospects, rather than focusing on the status quo and present-day positions of regional actors.

20. The issue of protracted territorial conflicts in the shared neighbourhood (including lessons from the older conflicts in the post-Soviet space for the Donbas crisis) should be a priority for future Minsk Dialogue meetings, especially given Minsk’s other role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (the “other” “Minsk Group”). A technical dialogue between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union would be another priority, only with a longer-term perspective.

- [Download Another Yalta is Impossible \(non-paper\)](#)
- [Загрузить Новая Ялта невозможна \(рабочий документ\)](#)

*This non-paper is the result of the inaugural conference held in Minsk on 26-28 March 2015. The Minsk Dialogue is a joint initiative by two Belarusian think-tanks – the Liberal Club and the Ostrogorski Centre – that aims to create a Track-II platform to address the most challenging international issues in the ‘shared neighbourhood between the European Union and Russia. The Minsk Dialogue undertakes regular expert gatherings and publications to offer up-to-date policy advice for fostering cooperation across existing dividing lines.*

---

## **Sanctions, Peace Talks, Bologna Process: Is There Hope for Change?**

After a second attempt, on 14 May Belarus joined the [Bologna process](#) and the group of 47 countries forming the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

While Belarus's acceptance into the Bologna process may open up prospects for long-term improvements in Belarusian education, there should not be any illusions about the full implementation of the Bologna principles or real political liberalisation in the country.

Minsk is utilising politically neutral spheres to improve his relationship with the West. EU officials should keep this in mind that after his 21 years in power, Lukashenka has continued to play off the EU and [Russia](#) for his own sake.

## **Between East and West**

By all appearances, the situation looks as if it is a repeat of the scenario that unfolded before the presidential elections in 2010, when a brief period of warming up between Minsk and Brussels was later shattered by mass repression after the elections in December. Since that time, the relationship has deteriorated or been consistently poor, right up until the recent thaw that has gained traction following Minsk's hosting of peace talks.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless”

Taking sides for Lukashenka is not an easy task: too pro-West and he seems problematic for the Russian side. Too pro-Russian and he appears as if he is ready to surrender Belarusian statehood to Russia. Nevertheless, Lukashenka has been playing the balancing game for a long time and is quite good at it.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless” and threatened to leave the Eurasian Union when Russia limited imports on certain Belarusian goods due to Russian sanctions against the EU. Lukashenka clearly understands the vulnerability of Belarusian economy due to its overwhelming dependence on the Russian market.

Lukashenka has shown his disdain for Russia's foreign policy by refusing to recognise Abkhazia and Ossetia or join in the Russian sanctions against Europe. However, this behaviour has resulted in gas, oil and food products problems for the Belarusian economy, a sign that Lukashenka's speeches can only go so far.

He is not willing to open up to Europe either. On February 16, he clearly declared in an interview with the state-run “Russia 1” TV channel: “If you think that’s the reason [for the peace talks], that I'm turning to someone – get that rot out of your

head.”

## **A Thaw between the West and Belarusian Head of State**

Belarusian media has called the Minsk peace talks over Ukraine a great diplomatic victory for Belarus and, personally, for Alexander Lukashenka. A visit by the French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave grounds for Belarusian authorities to say that Minsk is the capital of Eastern European diplomacy.

the EU has no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe

It also demonstrated to the Belarusian opposition, in the wake of the presidential elections later this year, that the EU has no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe in the near future.

[Hosting international talks](#) aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine has won Lukashenka some acclaim and served as an indicator of a thaw between the West and the Belarusian leader. The United States has lifted sanctions against Belarusneft, a state-owned Belarusian energy company, imposed in 2011 for its involvement in the Iranian petroleum sector.

Among other symptoms of the dialogue between EU and Belarus are an increase in the number of official visits to Europe by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei and the rumoured plans that Belarus might participate in the Riga summit “Eastern Partnership” at the presidential level. Lukashenka's participation would allow him to improve his own standing overall, including breaking through the West's wall of isolation that it has erected against Belarus.

One ex-presidential candidate in Belarus, Vitaly Rimasheusky, views the Summit as “a reflection of a new European policy – the resumption of relations with the Lukashenka regime,

despite previous statements about the impossibility of having relations before the release of all political prisoners.”

### **Reality: the Bologna Process and Hockey**

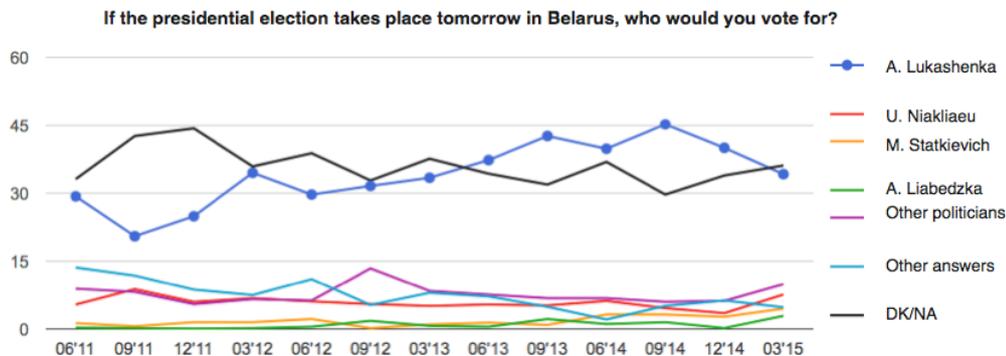
While the West has been overlooking the flaws of the Belarusian regime in the wake of the weak signals of liberalisation, Belarus has continued to play a balancing act between Russia and the West.

Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations

By focusing on geopolitical factors, Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, Belarus has taken a neutral stance and has improved relations with the West simply by providing a platform for negotiations. Belarusian officials continue to garner favour from the West by agreeing to implement minimal reforms in education.

The EU gave Belarus the go ahead to join the Bologna Process even though the educational system is still a crude mix of the old Soviet system and some external, neoliberal influences. The discourse of Belarusian authorities has not changed much since their last application to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2012 when the application was rejected. The geopolitical situation, however, was much more favourable this time around.

On the other hand, Minsk continues to respect its Eastern neighbour. After beating the United States for the first time (5-2) at the ice hockey world championship, Russia defeated the Belarusian hockey team 7-0 as a symbolic gesture for the 70th anniversary of Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It should be noted that a few days before that Russia lost to the United States 4-2.



Lukashenka's [fifth presidential election](#) will unlikely bring any surprises. Even though, according to IISEPS, Lukashenka's approval has been going down since September 2014, the Belarusian leader continues to enjoy more popular approval than any other potential political leader.

With the presidential election coming at the end of 2015, Europe is counting on Lukashenka to deal with potential protests in a wiser manner. However, despite improving ties with the West, history has shown that the Belarusian leader will not hesitate to resort to severe measures to secure his position if it comes to it.

# Chinese Missiles, CSTO, Belarusian Air Force – Belarus Security Digest

China is gradually replacing Russia in the security arena for Belarus. The programme of development for the domestic UAVs is well under way.

The national Air Force has received four combat Yak-130 training aircraft, all manufactured in Russia.

Despite the difficulties in the traditional markets of Russia and Ukraine, the Belarusian military and industrial complex has shown exhibited some positive dynamics. Belarus helps Tajikistan to secure its border with Afghanistan.

### **Chinese missiles are in already Belarus**

Sino-Belarusian high-level contact has been rather active over the past month. On 7-10 April, Alexander Miazhujeu, State Secretary of Belarus' Security Council, visited the People's Republic of China. The parties discussed, among other things, China's support to Belarus in strengthening its defence capabilities.

Alexander Miazhujeu held several meetings with China's top military and Party leaders as well as with Yin Liming, President of the China Great Wall Industry Corporation, and Guo Zhaoping, President of China's Airspace Long-March International Trade Company.

Long-March is a manufacturer of defence goods, including missiles, multiple rocket launcher systems (MRLS), rocket engines, high precision guided bombs, and unmanned aerial vehicles.

### **The next stage of tests of Grif-1 UAVs has begun**

In April, military tests of Grif-1 unmanned aerial vehicle have started. The army received one BAK-100 system, which includes four GRIF-1s and several support vehicles. After the testing is concluded, the Ministry of Defence is set to receive several more systems before the end of this year.

The tests are supposed to confirm the UAV's estimated parameters. Thus far, the drones have being equipped with foreign-manufactured engines, but there are plans to develop a domestically manufactured engine before the tests are over (by the end of the year).

## **The Belarusian Air Force has four more aircraft**

On 27 April, at the Belarusian air force base in Lida, the Air Force received four Yak-130s, a combat training aircraft, that are manufactured in Russia. Additionally, the Irkut Aircraft Corporation plans to supply eight more of these aircraft to Belarus. The contract for four Yak-130 has already been signed, and there is an option for four more aircraft. Belarusian officials have confirmed these plans.

The next batch of aircraft should be delivered before 2020. This option is likely to be taken up sometime after 2020. The Czech combat training aircraft L-39, ten units of which the Belarusian Air Force uses, will remain in service until 2020.

## **The domestic military and industrial complex is looking for new markets**

On 28 April, the Board of the State Military and Industrial Committee (SMIC) met. The Board focused on the efficiency of the chief technical designers' work in developing and manufacturing new (innovative) products. It was said that presently, all of the necessary conditions had been created for the development of new types of equipment and sources for funding of for them has already been secured. However, it appears that the chief technical designers have not been working efficiently enough.

Siarhiej Huruliou, the head of the SMIC, spoke about implementation of the projects for the development of medium-range anti-aircraft missile systems and a range of light-armour combat vehicles.

In general, in the first trimester of this year, the SMIC-sponsored companies increased their industrial output twofold. The exports of goods and services increased by 2.7% compared to the same period of 2014. After the first half of 2015, the SMIC plans to increase the volume of industrial output by 47% compared to the same period of 2015 and the exports of goods

and services by 3 to 5%.

The main issue concerns the overdue receivables, especially foreign receivables. There is a high dependence on the Russian market or on a narrow range of customers to get the necessary inputs. Belarus needs to take systematic efforts to diversify supplies of works and services.

### **Belarus has fulfilled its obligations towards Tajikistan in the framework of the CSTO**

For two years already, Tajikistan has been waiting for emergency assistance from the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to secure its border with Afghanistan. Dushanbe has legitimate grievances due to these delays. On 2 April, at a meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the CSTO, Sirodzhiddin Aslov, Tajikistan's Foreign Minister, expressed his dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. The heads of states early adopted the decision to assist Tajikistan back in September 2013.

This initiative was to be implemented in two stages. First, the emergency assistance should have been sent, and then a special programme to reinforce the Tajik – Afghan border should have been developed. Thus far, only Belarus and Armenia have provided emergency assistance to Tajikistan. Belarus sent clothing as well as protective and survival equipment, and Armenia provided vehicles.

There has been no information about other CSTO member states providing assistance. Meanwhile, all of the Alliance members (and especially Russia) have been vocally expressing their concern about the possibility of the situation in Afghanistan destabilising, the increase of cross-border crime, and extremism in the Central Asian countries.

The level of cooperation of the CSTO members continues to be rather minimal. The parties fail to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate even on the issues that affect their

own interests. Traditionally, in the post-Soviet space, high-level agreements are not binding. Meanwhile, the CSTO's concern about the developments in Central Asia has a sturdy foundation. It is not only the prospects of destabilisation of Afghanistan that raise alarm, as other issues carry weight as well.

Central Asian countries are still vulnerable, and the ruling regimes there are unstable. As opposition political activities are being suppressed in the countries of the region, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, and there are still serious social problems, the protest potential is moving more and more towards religion-related political activities.

Notably, the Soviet-era leaders still remain in power in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the largest countries in the region, and the question of a transition of power after their departure remains unresolved there. Or rather, that is how it looks from the outside.

*Andrei Parotnikau*

*Belarus Security Blog*

---

## **Political Opposition in Belarus: Movements Instead of Parties**

At the Chernobyl Way rally last month, activists from the opposition group Malady Front carried a controversial poster titled "Game Over." The poster, listing most opposition parties and movements, highlighted the dire state of the

democratic opposition in Belarus.

Activist Mikola Dziamidzenka, who carried the poster, explained that the opposition parties are losing membership and legitimacy because senior figures are putting their ambitions above the common cause. Dziamidzenka's statement follows the departure of Uladzimir Niakliajeu, one of the most prominent opposition figures, from the opposition coalition.

Opposition leaders increasingly split from their parties and create civic movements, which combine political goals with social and cultural initiatives. A 2014 article by Konstantin Ash in *Democratization* suggests that foreign assistance for pro-democracy movements, combined with political repression within Belarus, may be to blame for the fragmented state of the Belarusian opposition today. According to Ash, opposition leaders have to campaign and challenge the regime to secure funding. The cycle restarts with each bout of post-election repression, when old movements divide and new aid-seeking entities emerge.

## Contesting Elections For Seats in Prison

During Belarus's twenty-year history, eleven out of seventeen presidential hopefuls saw their run for office end in [harassment, prison](#), or even exile. Despite this, the number of presidential candidates grew from just two in the 2001 election to three in 2006 and ten in 2010. Their vote shares, on the other hand, fell from a maximum of 16% in 2001 to 6% in 2006 to 2% in 2010.

Presidential Election	Best performing opposition candidate	Vote share	No. candidates
2001	Vladimir Goncharik	16%	2
2006	Alexander Milinkevich	6%	3
2010	Andrey Sannikov	2%	9

Nonetheless, three opposition politicians have already declared their intention to run in the [November 2015 election](#): Anatoly Liabedzka, Chairman of the United Civic Party; [Taciana Karatkevich](#) of Tell the Truth campaign; and Siarhei Kaliakin of the left-wing party The Free World. While some argue that this is the only opportunity to legitimately reach a broader constituency in Belarus, others see the absence of a unified candidate as a weakness.

## Fickle Membership in Opposition Parties

On paper, membership in both opposition and [pro-government parties](#) in Belarus has grown over time. In reality, twenty years of repression have probably thinned the base of active members in the opposition parties. According to Ihar Barysau of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), “Under a dictatorship...opposition organisations are less engaged in real politics than in trying to survive.”

New members are hard to recruit due to the low visibility of the opposition, the persistent lack of electoral success, and the high risk of being associated with groups that oppose the incumbent regime. Intraparty conflicts sometimes lead to the outflow of existing members.

Many current members of opposition parties joined in the 1990s, at the height of Belarusian democracy. Newcomers also join during election years, when the opposition is most prominently displayed in the media. Recruitment through friends and professional networks predominates – “few people come in from the street”, Barysau said.

Party	Membership over time	
Belarusian National Front	1,259 (2002)	5,500 (2015)
United Civic Party	3,125 (2002)	3,668 (2015)
Belarusian Social Democrats (Hramada)	1,171 (2002)	1,200 (2015)
Belarusian Christian Democracy	3,691 (2010)	7,742 (2014)

Belarusian Christian Democracy, an unregistered party founded in 2005, has enjoyed the greatest gains in the number of supporters. The party recruits during campaigns, via social networks, and by keeping detailed records of people who have attended its events. According to Dzianis Sadouski, each potential supporter is contacted at least two to three times.

## **Leaders Play an Outsized Role and Contribute to Fragmentation**

An analysis of [media references](#) by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) in 2014 suggests that, around one-third of the time, individual politicians from the opposition are mentioned without party or movement affiliation.

State harassment of opposition politicians is especially effective because the opposition movement fares poorly without strong leadership. For example, while the 2006 presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin was in prison, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) nearly fell apart due to the contentious decision to reshuffle leadership. The party endured another crisis following the departure of chairman Anatol Liaukovich, who was accused of breaking the party's charter, in 2011.

Another 2006 election candidate, Alyaksandr Milikevich, lost leadership of Coalition Plus Five following incarceration. He reacted by forming his own movement, For Freedom.

Last month, Uladzimir Niakliajeu, the most recognisable among the opposition politicians, [left the opposition coalition](#) People's Referendum and announced plans to create a new movement for the statehood and independence of Belarus. The emergence of yet another entity would exacerbate the fragmentation of the opposition.

## **Reliance on Western Donors**

For the Belarusian opposition, domestic electoral success and state financing lie outside the realm of possibility. But international popularity – and funding – are attainable. Trips abroad by some opposition politicians thus seem to play a disproportionate role when compared to party activities aimed at developing the domestic base. According to data collected by BISS, trips abroad accounted for 9.1% of all media references to opposition parties in 2013, and meetings with foreign politicians for 17.5%. At the same time, meetings with the domestic electorate made up just 27% of media references.

Competition for international support, as well as close encounters with the Belarusian KGB and prisons, may explain why opposition leaders are so suspicious of each other. For example, in 2011, Stanislau Shuskevich of Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly called 2010 presidential candidates Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Yaraslau Ramanchuk traitors and criticised their invitation to a Warsaw conference on democratisation.

## **Proliferation of Movements**

The proliferation of movements, such as the one proposed by Niakliajeu, may be another product of the dependence on foreign support in a repressive political environment. The number of political parties – registered and unregistered – has remained constant since 2008, while the number of movements continues to grow.

Establishing a movement carries several advantages. First, some international donors may feel uneasy when overtly seeking political influence by supporting political parties. Civic movements, in contrast to parties, can tap into a broader pool of international funding, adjusting their stated goals in accordance with the available grants. They can compete in both

social and political spheres.

Second, political parties [lack the trust and confidence](#) of the post-Soviet electorate. Being classified as a movement brings up fewer negative associations in Belarus and facilitates recruitment. It allows claiming legitimacy on grounds other than electoral success.

One should not expect electoral miracles from an opposition that has no access to mass media or domestic funding. This November's election is all but certain to end in another victory for Alexander Lukashenka, regardless of how united the opposition is.

Having witnessed the aftermath of Maidan protests in Ukraine, the majority of Belarusians believes in "As long as there is no war!" and is willing to overlook the country's deepening economic problems. Instead of playing Don Quixote and waiting for a Belarusian Maidan, the opposition should prepare for the long haul. That means building trust among the electorate, developing distinct party platforms, and aiming to influence particular policies of the Belarusian state.

---

# **CharkaShkvarka, BEROCC Conference, Shorebirds Festival – Belarus Civil Society Digest**

Belarusians can afford less than 300 shots of vodka and pork bites per month, according to BIPART's new CharkaShkvarka Index. Sustainable Development Week continues until May 25.

34mag launches a series of off-line meetings with the editorial teams of Belarusian media. BEROC announces opening of the registration for the Fifth International Conference in Economics and Finance. Science Without Borders project will make science closer to ordinary people.

Free bike rental launches in Minsk from May 1. Andrei Bastunets elected new Chair of BAJ. Accessibility Forum showcases initiatives to increase inclusivity of Belarusian society.

## **Initiatives**

[Nash Dom campaign explains its communication provocations with purpose to promote women's leadership and gender issues.](#)

Photos in the pin-up style, where the Nash Dom leader, Olga Karach is presented as a la Marilyn Monroe are conscious provocative, because it is the way where "the Belarusian society reacts most". The previous 8-year traditional efforts haven't given significant results, while over the last two years Nash Dom's provocations have successfully raised a topic of female presidential candidate in the public sphere.

[Shorebirds Festival in Turov.](#) In early May, Gomel region hosted the sixth Festival of Shorebirds, traditionally organised by APB-BirdLife Belarus NGO and the local municipality. The main purpose of the festival is eco education of local residents and children. The participants visited a local meadow, a unique place where hundreds of thousands of birds stop for rest and meals during seasonal migrations.

[34mag with informational support of Press Club Belarus launches a project Open Briefing.](#)

This is a series of off-line meetings with the editorial teams of Belarusian media. The events will be held every Thursday in May, in the TSEKH space. The internal kitchen will be told by *Bolshoimagazine*, KYKY.org, Belarusian Tribune and CityDog.by. This series of

meet-ups is designed for all who are interested in the field of Belarusian media. The first meeting with the *Bolshoi* magazine took place on May 7.

[MediaBarCamp 2015: Sub-Cultures of Politics](#). On May 7-10, the 8th international MediaBarCamp 2015, a unique social media, participant-driven, non-conference event, is taking place in Lithuania. The event has brought together activists from Belarus and all around the world. The organisers are the Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC) in cooperation with local partners in Belarus and Sweden. The topic of 2015 is Sub-Cultures of Politics.

[Accessibility Forum opened with a dozen of different initiatives](#). On April 28, the Accessibility Forum, the key event of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessibility Week, gathered together examples of Belarusian initiatives representing successful practices of expansion of accessibility of inclusion to public life and perspective ideas. However, state representatives didn't find it necessary to visit an open event despite the invitation to cooperation. Organised by the DisRights Office, the [Accessibility Week 2015](#) took place on April 24-30 and included a series of thematic events to show the society the importance of accessibility issues for persons with disabilities.

## **Lectures, Seminars, Conferences**

[BEROC announces opening of the registration for the Fifth International Conference in Economics and Finance](#) that will take place in Minsk on June 2. The goal of the conference is to facilitate integration of the Belarusian economic community into the global academic environment. Professors of the best universities and business schools from all over the world will be among the speakers and moderators of the conference. Working language is English.

[Summer School on Human Rights calls for participation in 2015](#). Organised by the international community of human rights

organizations, the Summer School will take place in Vilnius, at the Belarusian Human Rights House. The educational course aims to introduce to the history and philosophy of human rights, as well as methods of protection at the national and international levels. Young people from Belarus at the age of 18-27 years are invited to participation.

['Science Without Borders' project invites to a lecture on astronomy](#). On April 30, the Central Scientific Library hosts a public lecture *Clashes of Galaxies* by astronomy Alexander Shimbalev. The lecture is a part of the 'Science Without Borders' project, initiated by the Youth Educational Center *Fialta*. The project aims to make complicated scientific issues clear and attractive and respectively provide knowledge outside the walls of schools, universities, laboratories, using accessible language and informal communication with the experts. The project [got support](#) from the national contest of social projects Social Weekend 5.□

[EU-funded project holds training seminars for CSOs in Belarus](#). The EU-funded '[Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress](#)' project has conducted a series of training seminars in Belarus aimed to enhance the capacity of CSOs and to help them more effectively to participate in policy dialogue. Representatives from 20 CSOs took part in trainings, which included six seminars over a period of a year. The project is implemented by Consortium led by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. in cooperation with local NGOs from the EaP Countries.

[EU/UNDP: Funding for local initiatives discussed in Minsk](#). On April 24, Minsk hosted the first round table within the framework of the EU/UNDP project [Support to Local Development in the Republic of Belarus](#). Participants of the meeting are representatives of local authorities of Minsk region and the regional CSOs – reviewed case studies of international technical aid projects that were implemented in Belarus and discussed preparation for the 1st Contest of Local Initiatives.

## Other

[The contest video stories Aktyvi333uysya/Get Active named the winners](#). Video clips submitted under the competition of NewGroupMedia, tell about civic activism and promote socially important topics for society and communities. The winner of the contest became a video "The brutality will not go unpunished" by the legal service *Lapa law*, which draws attention to the mistreatment of animals and tells what to do if you face it.

[During the first quarter of 2015, prices rose by 4.9%, but "eating and drinking" became cheaper by 2.6%](#). Such data are presented in the CharkaShkvarka Index by the BIPART think tank. The Index takes into account the cost of a standard shot of vodka (charka) and 100 grams of pork (shkvarka). The Index converts income residents into CharkaShkvarka – thus, today, having the average salary of 6.5 million rubles (about \$450) Belarusians can afford 297 sets of "eat and drink". This is one of the lowest indicators compared to neighboring countries.

[Free bike rental appears in Minsk](#). From May 1 to October 1, 2015, Minsk residents and guests have an opportunity to rent a bike for a day for free. Bicycles will be located on bicycle parking on a code lock with a password available through a free online service. Free bike rental is implemented under the *Kind Bike* project; the organizers collected 37 used bicycles, put them in order and prepared for the season. Also, on May 1, the first ever [City Bike Parade](#) launches a bike season in Minsk.

[Andrei Bastunets elected Chairperson of BAJ](#). This is a unanimous decision taken by delegates of the IX Congress of the Belarusian Association of Journalists on April 24, in Minsk. Zhanna Litvina, who had performed the functions for almost 20 years, announced she would not suggest her candidacy for the post. Earlier, 48-year Andrei Bastunets was BAJ deputy

chairperson.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

---

# **Will Lukashenka Mediate A Russian-Georgian Rapprochement?**

On 22-24 April Aliaksandr Lukashenka paid his first official visit to Georgia in the history of his reign. Belarus and Georgia have maintained minimal economic and political ties over the years, mainly due to Russia's confrontation with Georgia that has continued to develop over the past decade.

However, Belarus has refused to support the Russian-backed breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for which it received a lot of support from Georgia in the international arena. Instead, Minsk seeks to counterbalance Russia's influence on post-Soviet integration projects, and an alliance of smaller states could make their voices stronger in talks with Kremlin.

At the same time, Lukashenka's rhetoric is pushing for a reconciliation between Russia and Georgia, which could enhance his positions both in Moscow and in the West.

**Lukashenka's First Visit to Georgia Ever**

Lukashenka's visit to Georgia was truly a historic event, as it was the first visit of Belarusian leader to Georgia after the USSR's collapse. Lukashenka met the President and Prime Minister of Georgia, the Patriarch of Georgian Orthodox Church, the leader of the autonomous republic of Ajaria and other senior officials. Several Belarusian Ministers accompanied Lukashenka and were behind him as they signed a number of agreements for industry, agriculture and internal affairs.

So far Belarus has had little economic cooperation with Georgia, and bilateral trade has accounted for only \$62m in trade in 2014. With Lithuania, a country of a similar size as Georgia, Belarus has a trade turnover of \$1.5bn, a far more substantial amount. There is not even a Belarusian embassy in Georgia, though the Georgian embassy in Minsk has been working since 2007.



Upon his arrival in Tbilisi, Lukashenka has vocally emphasised Georgia's role in backing Belarus internationally: "We have no issues politically. I am grateful to your former and present presidents for your support towards Belarus in the West".

Lukashenka has also stated that Belarus supports the territorial integrity of Georgia as recognised by international treaties. He promised that a Belarusian embassy will appear in Tbilisi within a year's time.

Lukashenka has also stressed that improving relations between Georgia and Russia remains an important issue: "I think that

soon we will understand how to not only overcome this unfriendly rhetoric, but to reconcile the views of our countries and live as one big family as we did before”, Lukashenka stated.

### **Ups and Downs of a Distant Friendship**

Belarus has never seen Georgia as a foreign policy priority, neither in political nor economic terms. In 2004 the Belarusian authorities viewed the new president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili cautiously after he came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution. At that time, ahead of the 2006 presidential elections, the Belarusian leadership was afraid of having a colour revolution break out at home, as one country after another rid themselves of their Soviet-era leadership.

However, after the elections, as Lukashenka ensured his continued rule, and during the start of the Russian-Georgian tensions, the relations between the two countries began to improve. For one, Belarus refused to support Russia's initiative like a ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, and even attempted to smuggle it into Russia.



Furthermore, following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Belarus refused to recognise the self-proclaimed independent republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both backed by Russia, which led to a bit of discontent in the Kremlin and garnered acclaim in the West.

The Russian media has since repeatedly attacked Lukashenka for his position on the issue, an onslaught which they further responded to with purely pragmatic calculations – the Kremlin would not reimburse Belarus' losses from possible sanctions by the West in case of their recognition.

Belarus's position on the topic made Georgian leaders very happy and [led to a lobby of active support](#) for Belarus on the international level regardless of its undemocratic record. Lukashenka and Saakashvili met personally several times and seemed to have had very friendly ties. According to Wikileaks, Saakashvili unofficially invited Lukashenka to visit Georgia, but he said he would not dare to anger Russia by doing so.

### **Russian Envoy or Talented International Player?**

The main question behind Lukashenka's visit was its rationale – whether he came to Georgia as the president of an independent country or as Russia and the Eurasian Union's envoy. Most Georgian experts think that Lukashenka came at the request of Putin, while also trying to capitalise on the role of being a mediator's, as he [has successfully done](#) recently hosting European leaders at Minsk talks over Ukraine crisis.

One observer opined that Lukashenka came with a message from Putin

The Director of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies Kakha Gogolashvili in a comment for Deutsche Welle opined that Lukashenka came with a message from Putin, as this visit could not have happened without the Kremlin's permission. The development of Belarusian-Georgian relations was not Lukashenka's key objective, or so many experts believe.

However, Andrej Kazakievič, director of the Minsk-based 'Political Sphere' Institute, in a comment to Belarus Digest doubted that Putin played any role in Lukashenka's visit. This

move by the Belarusian leadership is rather logical in the context of pushing for a general improvement of relations with the West and pursuing a more balanced foreign policy.

Belarus is attempting to counterbalance Russian dominance in post-Soviet projects like the Eurasian Economic Union and the CIS, and therefore seeks out alliances with other small states. The economic background of the visit is also important, despite the current insignificant trade figures, as particular sectors of the Belarusian economy can benefit from expanding in to the Georgian market.

Clearly, Moscow is interested in engaging Georgia in the post-Soviet projects of Russia and helping to disway it from its EU and NATO aspirations, which Georgia have been consistently demonstrating. Meanwhile, Georgia realises that the west will not offer its military assistance in case of Russian intervention, as Ukraine conflict has showed, and it cannot therefore secure Georgia's independence.

The only thing Georgia can do in current situation is to improve relations with Moscow and other post-Soviet countries. And Lukashenka fits well in the role of peacemaker and mediator, both for Georgia and Russia.

Lukashenka should be happy to play his part in this role, as he indeed is continuing to reap all kinds of benefits and strengthening his position in the West and in Russia, and thus securing himself another safe presidential term regardless of his electoral conduct.

But his ambitions concern not only politics. Belarus has a long time failed to establish its economic interests in Georgia, as Russia would consider any serious improvement of relations as attack on its interests. Now, Lukashenka can kill two birds with one stone – ensure his political career and promote external trade with Belarus, which is experiencing [tough times](#) due to Russia's own recession.

Both countries have completely different geopolitical aspirations, as Georgia has signed an association agreement with the EU and Belarus is a member of Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. But as the Georgian president said during his meeting with Lukashenka, this situation presents them with more opportunities, though a significant challenge as well.

Belarus and Georgia can use each other as entry ways into major geopolitical projects in the regions, and this mutual support is most beneficial for both.

---

## **From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis**

Belarus is returning to the international spotlight, but for once, not just as the “last dictatorship in Europe”. The two summits that Minsk hosted in the past year on the conflict in east Ukraine indicate a tentative shift in Belarus’s political alignment.

Yaraslau Kryvoi and Andrew Wilson analyze what the West should do in relation to Belarus in a [paper](#) produced jointly by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Ostrogorski Centre.

Although Belarus was more of a broker than a genuine neutral party at the negotiations that produced the two “Minsk Agreements”, the government has profound doubts about Russia’s assault on its neighbour’s sovereignty.

But despite some changes in rhetoric, Belarus is not adjusting

its foreign policy because it wants to change itself. Instead, Lukashenka wants to preserve his system from Russian pressure. But recent moves to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty and nationhood risk undermining his traditional method of balancing between the West and Russia.

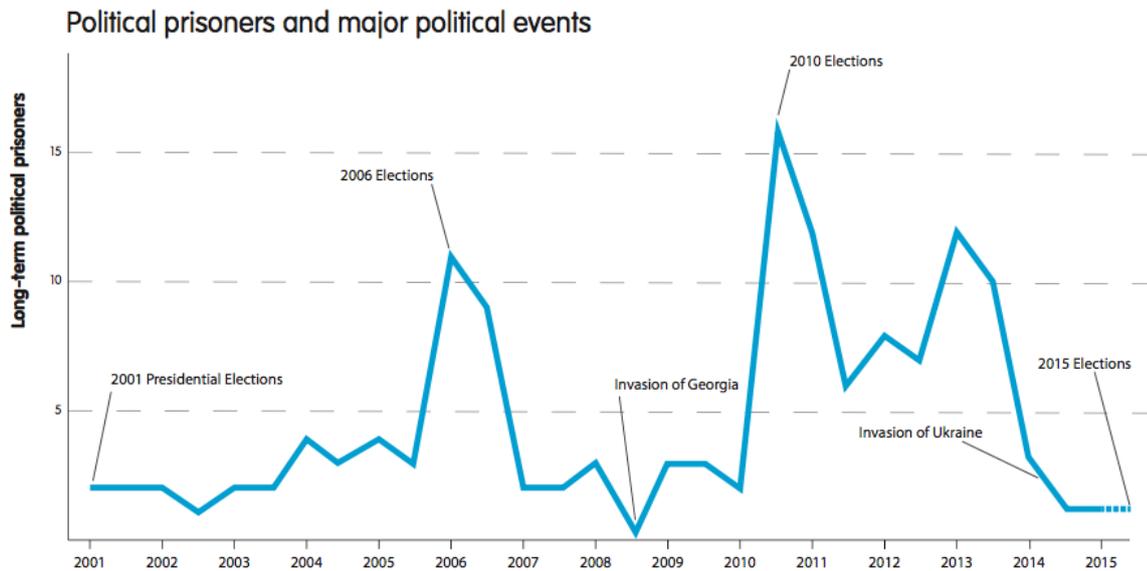


Figure 3: Long-term political prisoners and important political events

Source: The number of political prisoners is based on Amnesty International annual reports, which usually reflect the number at the end of the year.

Lukas henka's current overtures to the West differ from those he made in the previous period of tentative engagement in 2009-2010. That engagement ultimately failed because of the uneasy balance within a twin-track policy, with Belarus seeking foreign policy insurance against Russia by making token moves towards softening authoritarianism. This time, the second track is different. If the West seeks to engage, it will be by supporting Belarusian statehood, not by encouraging a putative domestic mini-liberalisation.

The EU has two ways to respond, either based on geopolitics and concern about Russia, or based in an effort to strengthen Belarusian society in the longer term. Both would drop the conditionality approach of "more for more" in all but name.

The EU would confine itself to supporting Lukashenka's policy of adjustment towards Russia, but without expecting fundamental change inside Belarus, and without taking steps

that might make relations with Russia even worse.

The EU would offer to assist in a more modern form of nation building, one that would gradually empower civil society from within

A more productive approach would be focused on Belarus itself, and would renew the policy of “engagement” without the unrealistic hopes of 2009-2010. The EU would offer to assist in a more modern form of nation building, one that would gradually empower civil society from within. The possibility of fomenting a quick regime change in Belarus has been unlikely since at least 2006.

The policy of engagement with Belarusian society recommended here would not be inconsistent with retaining individual visa bans and targeted sanctions imposed as a proportionate response to political imprisonment.

So, instead of criticising the regime from the sidelines, this approach would aim at patiently increasing if the EU’s presence in Belarus. The focus should be not just on human rights, but more broadly on the rule on law, not so much on quick political changes but more on good governance and fighting corruption. Without a presence on the ground, the EU has no bargaining power.

Such an approach would entail four main strands of EU activity:

- The EU should help to strengthen statehood and national identity politics as well as to counter the Russian propaganda machine.
- The EU should engage more across the board: in the first place, with civil society, which should ultimately create more demand for sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law in Belarus, but it should also interact more with the bureaucracy at all levels.

- Europe should provide indirect economic assistance: conduct a dialogue on economic modernisation and help with WTO membership and with expanding the role of the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.
- The EU should encourage stronger cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine, to ease Russian pressure on both states.

Countering Russian propaganda will be one of the most important tasks. The EU needs to confront aggressive anti-Western propaganda, which comes primarily from Russian media outlets in Belarus. Making independent media more accessible by means of increased and more effective trans-border TV, FM radio, and internet broadcasting would lead to more demand for democratic change.

At the same time, Belarusians should be given better access to information about the EU, its history and values. Although the EU has a Representative Office in Minsk, much more should be done to promote the EU at universities (for example, by organising public lectures, exchanges, and essay competitions) or for the wider public through civil society organisations. The EU needs to continue supporting Belsat TV, which is based in Poland, but it also needs to go beyond that and empower local voices from within.

Belarusian bureaucracy, the most influential group in Belarusian society, has much less understanding of the EU

In the past, the West has focused on educating human rights and opposition political activists about the EU and its values. But the Belarusian bureaucracy, the most influential group in Belarusian society, has much less understanding of the EU; it mainly gets its information from Russia-dominated media.

Brussels should increase its work in experience transfer and

should intensify educational programmes for officials (particularly the younger ones), focusing not on general geopolitical contradictions but on practical technical regulations, standards, and procedures. By engaging officials at all levels in meaningful cooperation, the EU will stimulate appetite for reforms in Belarus.

The EU has paid insufficient attention to the role of national identity in Belarus. For instance, the European Humanities University in Lithuania, one of the largest donor-supported projects, has slowly drifted from being Belarus-focused to catering for a larger group of Russian-speakers in the former Soviet space. However, without the development of a stronger national identity, Belarus could easily become a part of Russia, particularly after Lukashenka is gone.

Civil society groups should be supported, but so should the cautious steps of the Belarusian authorities, who are afraid to anger the Russian nationalists now dominant in Russia. This support should take the form not just of moral encouragement but also of concrete long-term programmes. This is one of the areas in which the interests of the Belarusian authorities, civil society, and the EU coincide.

Belarus receives more Schengen visas per capita than any other country but most of these visas are issued for only a few days or months

Lowering the visa barrier by decreasing visa fees and making them free for many categories of Belarusians would also strengthen pro-European sentiment in wider Belarusian society, as would developing business and civil society contacts.

Currently Belarus receives more Schengen visas per capita than any other country. But most of these visas are issued for only a few days or months, forcing Belarusians to submit repeatedly to expensive, tedious and sometimes humiliating visa procedures. The EU should issue more multiple-year visas for

Belarusians who have a good history of travelling to the EU. This should become a rule rather than an exception.

The EU's scholarship programmes, such as the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians, should be expanded to include exchanges of PhD students and academics. However, it is not enough to help young people leave Belarus and study at Western universities. It is equally important to create fellowship programmes to support Western-qualified Belarusians in returning to their home country to work in education, public sector, or policy-oriented organisations. That would address Belarus's need for Western expertise and alleviate the brain-drain problem.

Although the Eastern Partnership has largely failed to reach its objectives on Belarus, it is important to keep Belarus involved even just as a formal member of this club, to enable it to cooperate with Ukraine and other countries of the region on matters of mutual interest. Clearly, the current Belarusian leadership remains uninterested in the prospect of joining the EU, which means that it has a very different motivation to leaders of countries such as Ukraine. This means a more individualised approach is needed.

Finally, many of the problems Belarus faces are similar to those of Ukraine. This should lead to the encouragement and funding of cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine at all levels (state and non-state), including common research initiatives, grant programmes, and exchange schemes for academics and policymakers.

- Read full paper [From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis](#).
- Чытаць цалкам [Ад санкцый да самітаў: Беларусь пасля крызісу ва Украіне](#)

# Belarus Turns to Pro-Western Nations in the Middle East

Belarus's recent leaning towards pro-Western nations in the Middle East follows fast on the heels of rapprochement with the West. On 6-7 May, Joint Belarus-Saudi Committee on Cooperation will meet in Riyadh. On 15 April, Belarus opened an embassy in Qatar.

Establishing closer links with the very centres of conservative Arab bloc allied with the West is a milestone in Belarusian foreign policy. In the past, Minsk enjoyed amicable relations primarily with the so-called radical republican regimes in the Middle East. Saddam's Iraq, Qadhafi's Libya, Assad's Syria, as well as Ahmadinejad's Iran figured among Belarus's main partners.

The shift towards pro-Western monarchies reveals a contradictory, yet pragmatic approach by Minsk. The Belarusian government is looking for quick money to compensate for Belarus's trade deficits with other countries, though some odd deals and alliances have emerged as a result.

## **Minsk's New Friends Killed Its Earlier Buddies**

Commenting on the embassy opening in Qatar on 31 March, deputy foreign minister Alyaksandr Huryanau called Qatar Belarus's "longstanding political partner." This is a remarkable statement given this nation's role in toppling Minsk's former

friends in the Middle East.

Minsk's new approach in the Middle East complements its recent rapprochement with the West

The partnership with Qatar complements Minsk's other policies in the region. Besides establishing closer relations with Saudi Arabia, the Belarusian government has undertaken many other activities in the region in the last two months. It held political consultations with Oman and the UAE, received an Omani parliamentary delegation, sent its representative to a ministerial meeting of the Arab League – dominated by conservative Arab nations, – and sent a delegation to Pakistan, another nation allied with the pro-Western bloc in the Middle East.

What is more, Belarus has enjoyed excellent relations with Erdogan's Turkey and made attempts to befriend pro-Western Kurdistan. Minsk's policies in the Middle East complement its policy of rapprochement with the West. Belarus's attempt to move away from risky partners challenging the West is greatest in the history of its foreign policy to date.

### **Any Money in Sight?**

Belarus's previous, more limited, attempts at partnering with pro-Western states in the Middle East did not pay off as expected. In 2011, Minsk quietly renounced its close partnership with Libya and minimised its ties with Iran and Syria. It secured promises from Qatar of a new level of economic relations and investment. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has designs to create a kind of “Qatari Island,” a huge economic centre built on Arab money in Belarus, though thus far these and other plans have ended up creating nothing but a few hunting estates for Arab princes near Minsk.

A similar fate befell another project publicised over the past couple years – bringing Omani money to Belarus. Omani

businesses received a big swathe of land in Minsk to develop, but in 2012 gave up plans in the Belarusian capital.

Belarus's firm Beltekhekspart reportedly supplied ammunition to Libyan armed groups

Yet trade with the Gulf Arab monarchies has continued to slowly grow. In 2014, Belarus-Saudi commodity trading was valued at more than \$95m. This is almost as much as the last year's Belarus-Iran trade turn over of \$97m.

In addition, Minsk has become involved in murky deals with pro-Western Arab monarchies in other countries as well. This March, Reuters quoted an unpublished UN Security Council report on Belarus, according to which Beltekhekspart was supplying Libyan armed groups with ammunition. Minsk retorted that the deals were legal and involved the Libyan government. Importantly, the groups supplied by Belarus seem to enjoy Qatari support.

Later on, the French specialist bulletin *Intelligence online* added that military equipment might be also supplied by the Belarusian firm to Libyan militias. According to the French publication, Western governments gave tacit support to these supplies.

### **Away From Iran and Syria?**

As Minsk establishes rapport with the pro-Western Arab monarchies, it has been easing the level of contact with their opponents in the region – namely, Iran and Iran's allies. This year, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei has visited Syria only once, this past February.

Now, Tehran and its allies are displaying more interest in maintaining relations with Minsk. In February, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif came to Minsk, in April, and Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari and Syrian

Minister of Industry Kamaledin Ta'am have visited Belarus.

Yet these contacts are a mere shadow of Belarus's partnerships with these countries in the 2000s, when Minsk would host a new Iranian delegation almost every month. Minsk's recent level of engagement are not only less frequent but also far less meaningful. For example, Iraqi Foreign Minister's visit to Belarus resulted in both parties signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Sports.

Belarus's trade with both Iran and war-ravaged Syria has decreased in recent years. While in 2008, Belarus-Syria trade made up over \$85m, last year it barely exceeded \$30m. Current promises to establish an assembly production plant for Belarusian MAZ trucks in Syria are unlikely to materialise. While Iran may indeed pay for such a project in Syria, the ongoing civil war in Syria makes the actual implementation of the project unlikely in the near future.

### **To Support the Winners**

The Belarusian leadership has not changed its ideological preferences; it had none to begin with

The Belarusian government may go as far as to use its relations with Syria, Iran, and Iraq as a bargaining chip in relations with Western-allied Arab monarchies. The kings of the Gulf's willingness to buy up Iran's allies has already been exposed by Wikileaks, though Belarus can hardly attract the attention of Arab rulers on its own, and as such it is becoming an important ally of Tehran and Damascus and even as a source of military equipment and expertise for Syria, Iran, or Shiite Iraq.

The Belarusian leadership has not changed its ideological preferences; it had none to begin with. Not only does it is seek rapprochement with Western allies in the Middle East, but it has also followed a similar approach in other regions. For

example, its reception of North Korea's Foreign Minister in March was rather cold. The Minister's trip was shortened by two days. Belarusian officials talked about "similar [to Pyongyang's] approaches to many issues" but not about "shared views," a standard statement in negotiations with developing countries. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry has emphasised that the meeting was "protocol-related".

Regardless, deals can be made with Minsk. The logic of Belarusian foreign policy stems from the political economy of a land-locked country with no notable natural resources and an industry that is in bad need of modernisation. Even though Lukashenka has decried the so-called Arab spring, which knocked down some of his earlier comrades, he prefers to accept the new situation and is working with the victors. The main priority of the Belarusian government is finding money that will allow it to survive.

---

## **The Western Approach to Belarus**

While attending the annual convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) in New York last week, I served as discussant on a panel on Belarus.

A paper by Tatsiana Kulakevich, a PhD candidate at Rutgers University, focused on the possible impact of the Belarusian Diaspora on US policy making. While her findings were preliminary, they posed some fascinating questions, not least, why the United States, by any standards, a Great Power, has for the past decade been so preoccupied with Belarus, a nation of 9.5 million with few natural resources and a very minor

trading partner.

Ms Kulakevich noted that the first major evidence of US concern about the flouting of human rights in Belarus was the US Democracy Act, introduced by Rep. Christopher Smith (R-New Jersey 4<sup>th</sup> district) in 2004, which was subsequently renewed and remains in place.

In the Senate, one of the Belarusian opposition's biggest supporters has been John McCain, the outspoken Republican Senator from Arizona. Around the time Smith introduced the Belarus Democracy Act, McCain was in Riga at a conference held by the Foreign Ministry of Latvia, lambasting Lukashenka.

### **US Interest in Belarus**

The US perceives the country as an anomaly in Europe and its president as an outdated hangover from the Soviet period

Though at times the commitment of the United States to promoting democracy in Belarus has been exaggerated—the US spends far less money on the Belarus opposition than it did on its Ukrainian counterpart in the past, and one would have to say that Ukraine is a much bigger priority—it perceives the country as an anomaly in Europe and its president as an outdated hangover from the Soviet period.

The corresponding question, however, is that given the commitment of government officials like Smith and McCain and their links with the Diaspora, why has support for the opposition been so ineffective? Dozens of opposition leaders and prominent figures have been hosted in Washington. The US also supports many NGOs directly or indirectly, which work on Belarusian affairs. Each election brings forth new leaders; all seem doomed to fail.

### **The EU and Belarus**

Sikorski warned Lukashenka "Sooner or later, you will have to flee your own country."

The same statement applies also to the EU. Four years ago, following the attack on demonstrators in Independence Square in Minsk after the December 2010 Presidential elections, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski warned Lukashenka "Sooner or later, you will have to flee your own country."

EU governments pledged more than \$120 million to support opposition groups and the president's time in office seemed numbered. In fact today it is Sikorski who is out of office, while Lukashenka remains very much in place.

One can suggest several reasons why the status quo reigns in Belarus in 2015.

US and EU commitment to change, while sincere, is far from wholehearted. The lack of change in Belarus paradoxically brings stability. There is no civil strife in Belarus. On 29 April, Lukashenka declared: "Belarus remains an island of peace, calm, and order, and that is our achievement." For many residents, these are not inconsiderable factors when entering a polling station.

Europe is like the Lernaean hydra of Greek mythology, it has many heads seeking different goals. Some would like change in Belarus, others seek its support in limiting Russian influence in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and other areas. Regime change in Belarus is very much on the back burner.

### **President's Control Mechanisms**

Lukashenka's regime is not continually violent; it is selective

The president has acted vindictively and ruthlessly against any manifestations of opposition, while carefully controlling elections in his favour. But the violence is targeted and

specific, and usually of short duration. Lukashenka's regime is not continually violent; it is selective. The extreme violence comes during an election or immediately afterward, or at times, such as 1999-2000, or 2010, when the president is genuinely afraid of being removed from office.

Also, by controlling most of the media, restricting alternative sources of power, and maintaining a populist and personal style of leadership, he has managed to stay in office, largely funded by Moscow loans, and balancing commitment to Russia with occasional moves toward the West, none of which seem remotely sincere. The media factor is the weakest grounded because of the increasing influence of social networks and growing ineffectiveness of the print media but it should not be discounted.

### **Miscalculations and Dissension**

There is a fundamental disassociation between what the West has asked of Belarus and the needs and desires of its electorate. Part of the latter has a jaundiced view of Western agencies and NGOs, and perceives some opposition leaders as practically Western puppets living off grants and subsidies from countries that seek to introduce radical reforms into the country. During elections, opposition candidates have had a tendency to spend as much time in foreign capitals as in the towns and villages of their own country.

Lastly, we should return to the Diaspora. As Ms. Kulakevich pointed out, the most influential group, and quite a small one, arrived in the United States after the Second World War, many fleeing from the Red Army. Three or four generations later, they are figuratively much further removed from their homeland and often deeply divided.

By contrast the much larger Ukrainian Diaspora in North America has close ties with the government in Kyiv. President of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Paul Grod, was an invited

guest at Petro Poroshenko's inaugural ceremony as president last summer, for example.

### **Another Option**

Prominent Belarusians in the West have ties only with the opposition, which in turn is ever more marginalised. The assumption is that the Belarusian leadership is monolithic, devoted to its president. Not only is that unlikely in Belarus, it is far from the case anywhere.

Peaceful regime change usually takes place from within. It is less violent and more clinical than a revolution. Such an option has rarely been explored in Western policy toward Belarus, which instead opted to sanction the entire leadership. It is time for some rethinking of a policy that has clearly failed.

*David Marples*

*David is a Distinguished University Professor at the University of Alberta in Canada. He writes a monthly column for Belarus Digest.*