

# Are Relations With Europe Back to Normal? – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The Belarusian government's crackdown on peaceful protests in early spring failed to markedly affect its contacts with the West.

In June-July, the intensity of Belarus's diplomatic dialogue with Europe was probably at its highest point in the last several years. However, Western leaders are still in no hurry to negotiate directly with President Lukashenka.

The authorities took advantage of the high-level meetings of the CEI and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk to promote their vision of Belarus as a responsible international player and regional mediator. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will discourage the West from focusing on issues of democracy.

## Exploiting international forums

Belarusian diplomats have been actively exploiting the country's rotating presidency in certain multilateral organisations, as well as Minsk's potential status as a venue for international events, to boost Belarus's image abroad and revamp bilateral ties.

Belarus has been doing its best to get the most out of its presidency in the Central European Initiative in 2017. This attitude stands in a stark contrast to [its earlier apathy](#) towards the activities of this loosely structured discussion

club.

On 8 June, Minsk hosted a high-level meeting entitled 'Promoting Connectivity in the CEI Region: Bridging the Gap between Europe and Asia'. The CEI participant countries, along with China and EAEU member states, focused on transport and logistics in correlation with the Silk Road initiative.

On 22 June, senior diplomats from the CEI countries gathered in Minsk for their annual meeting. Only six countries out of eighteen were represented by their foreign ministers. The final communiqué dealt mostly with the European aspirations of certain Western Balkan states and some Eastern Partnership countries. [Alexander Lukashenka](#), who did not miss the opportunity to meet with top foreign diplomats, underscored the importance of 'integration of integrations', his pet idea.

☒ On 5-9 July, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held its annual session in Minsk. The Belarusian authorities took this opportunity to interpret the choice of Minsk as a confirmation of Belarus's status as a 'pole of stability' in the region. They also used it to promote [Lukashenka's idea of a 'Helsinki-2 process'](#).

Belarusian diplomats managed to circumvent any reference to the human rights situation in Belarus in the final declaration of the session. However, four of six Belarusian MPs voted in favour of the Minsk Declaration, which also condemned Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. The Belarusian foreign ministry did not fail to present this staged voting as proof of [pluralism in the Belarusian parliament](#).

# Reaching out to the

# developing world

The Belarusian authorities are seeking to diminish the country's economic dependence on Russia by boosting Belarus's trade with the so called 'Distant Arc' countries.

On 6-7 June, Minsk hosted a new forum called 'Belarus and Africa: New Frontiers' with participation of over seventy delegates from about twenty African countries. So far, Africa remains the least cultivated market for Belarusian exporters and manufacturers.

Lukashenka, speaking as an [observer](#) at the Astana summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on 9 June, sought to persuade members of the organisation to strengthen the economic dimension of its activities, claiming that this would eventually help combat terrorism.

On 29 June, Lukashenka received his Vietnamese counterpart  Tran Dai Quang in Minsk. Belarus and Vietnam will seek to increase their turnover fourfold, from \$121m in 2016 to half a billion in a few years' time. Alongside more traditional Belarusian exports to developing countries, several innovative Belarusian high-tech companies are seeking to localise the assembly of their products in Vietnam.

On 26-28 June, Georges Rebelo Pinto Chicoti, the Angolan minister for external relations, visited Belarus. The two countries agreed to establish a joint trade commission and explore the viability of setting up knock-down assembly of Belarusian tractors in Angola.

In June and July, Belarus also held political and economic consultations on the deputy foreign minister level with Brazil, Cambodia, Cuba, India, Laos, and Vietnam.

# Maintaining intensive dialogue with Europe

Alexander Lukashenka recently ordered his diplomats to 'literally sink [their] teeth into the European market'. Indeed, economic issues prevailed on the agenda of the foreign ministry's senior officials as they met with their EU counterparts.

On 13-14 June, foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) visited Madrid. Belarus and Spain agreed to establish a joint commission on economic and industrial cooperation. The commission will first meet this autumn in Minsk.

From Madrid, Belarus's top diplomat went to Prague on 15-16 June, where he held talks with his Czech counterpart Lubomír Zaorálek and met with Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka.

The turnover between the two countries has been steadily falling since 2014. Speaking to media after the first ever official visit of a Belarusian foreign minister to Czechia, Makei expressed his hope that their 'theoretical agreement will turn into concrete projects' in bilateral relations.

On 19 June, Makei attended the annual Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting in Luxembourg, where he met with several top European and EU-level diplomats. There, he derided Lithuania's attempts to involve multilateral institutions in its bilateral problems with Belarus regarding the [construction of the Astraviec NPP](#) near their joint border.

☒ On 21-22 June, the foreign ministers of Hungary and Slovakia, Peter Szijjarto and Miroslav Lajcak, visited Minsk. Both diplomats combined their visits with their participation in the annual meeting of the CEI foreign ministers.

Makei called Szijjarto and Lajcak his friends. Indeed, Budapest and Bratislava have maintained constant dialogue with Minsk ever since the normalisation of relations with the EU. Both countries have also been important economic partners for Belarus. However, although the Belarusian government has managed to reverse the short-lived decrease in its trade with Hungary, the turnover with Slovakia has remained in a steady free-fall since 2012 – down by 40%.

On 5 July, Lukashenka received Austrian foreign minister Sebastian Kurz, who visited Minsk as Chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Lukashenka and Kurz also discussed the bilateral agenda. Austria, which has important economic interests in Belarus, is often seen as [one of the regime's strongest advocates in Europe](#).

On 18-20 July, Latvian foreign minister Edgars Rinkevics paid a working visit to Belarus. The two countries have maintained an annual exchange of foreign minister visits since 2013; they seek to expand ties in all areas of cooperation. Recently, Minsk and Riga secured the right to host the Ice Hockey World Championship jointly in 2021.

In recent weeks, Belarus also held political and economic consultations on the deputy foreign minister level with Austria, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Minsk hosted business delegations from Germany and Switzerland. On 6 July, President Lukashenka received a delegation of the United States Congress.

Belarusian diplomats have managed to restore the dynamics and climate of the country's ties with Europe to the level they enjoyed prior to the Belarusian authorities' recent crackdown on dissent. However, the full normalisation of relations with the West will require more than simply restraining from persecuting the opposition or promoting Belarus as a 'donor of security'. President Lukashenka's legitimacy in European capitals should be the foundation of the next stage in

relations.