Belarus Engages Europe, Maneuvering on Ukraine, Standstill with the US – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Alexander Lukashenka’s policy on Ukraine has won him many sympathisers both in Belarus and Ukraine. In his interview with Serbian media, he has also claimed a certain level of improvement in relations between Belarus and the European Union.

Belarus continues to reap the rewards of its policy of non-recognising breakaway territories, and as of late in its ties with Serbia. However, its relations with the United States have failed to normalise despite periodic diplomatic contact.

Reaffirming Support to Ukraine

The president of Belarus attended the inauguration of the new Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko. With the sole exception of his Moldovan counterpart, Alexander Lukashenka was the only head of a CIS country to visit Kyiv on this occasion.

By accepting an invitation from the Ukrainian authorities, Lukashenka explicitly showed his willingness to strengthen ties with the new authorities. Belarus sees no inconvenience in the fact that its closest ally, Russia, is waging a de facto war against Ukraine.

Lukashenka has yet to develop a close personal relationship with Poroshenko. The two presidents did not meet officially on inauguration day. In fact, the Belarusian president may regret reducing Speaker and ex-president Turchinov’s role in the government. Their meeting in Kyiv has clearly demonstrated
that the two men have been getting along rather well.

**Lukashenka's line of conduct in the Ukrainian crisis** has won him many new and often unexpected supporters among the Ukrainian elite and common Ukrainians. These developments have positively affected Ukrainians' attitude towards Belarus in general.

**Strengthening Cooperation with EU Members and Institutions**

The Belarusian foreign ministry has been tireless in its efforts to develop relations with the European Union in the existing framework of sanctions and restrictions. This month, Belarus' contact with the EU went well beyond the typical Central European circle.

Central European countries are still maintaining their prominent place in all of Belarus' interactions with the EU. Minsk held high-level consultations with Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia on a wide range of issues. Deputy Foreign Minister **Alena Kupchyna** also attended a meeting of the Central European Initiative's foreign ministers in Vienna.

Belarus still has a long way to go to normalise its relations with the EU backbone countries (Germany, France, Italy and the UK). However, its foreign ministry has managed to engage some 'Old Europe' countries in the dialogue. Alena Kupchyna met top foreign policy officials in Vienna and Helsinki. Economy Minister **Mikalaj Snapkou** met with Spanish Foreign Minister José García-Margallo.

Belarus talked extensively to the EU as an institution. Several high-level EU officials, led by Gunnar Wiegand, the European Commission's Director for Eastern Europe, visited Minsk to carry out consultations on modernisation. The goal of this dialogue was to determine the best form of future cooperation between Belarus and the European Union.
A Belarusian delegation also visited Brussels to attend the meetings of several functions related to the Eastern Partnership. There are strong indications that Belarus is seeking to go to the Riga summit at a much higher level of engagement with the activities of this initiative.

Belarus and the European Commission have engaged in expert consultations on the draft agreement liberalising the visa regime between Belarus and the EU. Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei admitted in his recent interview to BelaPAN news agency that the parties may even sign it at the Riga summit in autumn 2015.

Consolidating Friendship with Serbia

Alexander Lukashenka made an official visit to Serbia on 11-12 June. It was one of the rare visits of the Belarusian leader to a European nation associated with the EU.

Technically, Serbia has undertaken an obligation to align itself with all EU foreign policy decisions, including the visa and economic sanctions against Belarus. However, according to Serbian President Tomislav Nicolic, he agreed on Lukashenka's visit with Brussels and even postponed it once to accommodate Catherine Ashton's request.

Serbia has appreciated Belarus's refusal to recognise the unilateral independence of Kosovo. Belarus remains interested in Serbia as a stronghold in the Balkans. The Serbian presidency in the OSCE in 2015 may also be used by Belarus to strengthen its position in the organisation.

The two presidents issued a joint statement summarising the results of their talks. Together, along with many standard formulaic comments on the intention to develop cooperation in all possible fields, it includes a passage praising the advantages of Belarus' membership in the Customs Union and the newly created Eurasian Economic Union.
Despite some growth in their bilateral trade turnover, the two countries are still quite far from reaching their target figure of $500m, which they agreed on in Minsk last year.

**Meeting the US Envoy**

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Eric Rubin visited Minsk on 2 – 4 June. He met with a number of officials, including Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, as well as representatives of civil society.

The diplomats discussed issues related to bilateral cooperation. In the press release issued after the visit, the US embassy emphasised the "long-standing US concerns on the need for enhanced respect for human rights and democratisation". The Belarusian foreign ministry, in its turn, highlighted the "need to lift sanctions, which hinder the development of normal relations between Belarus and the United States".

A week later, President Obama extended the sanctions against Belarus for another year. It is a technical decision, which confirms the lack of any major positive shifts in bilateral relations. The two countries are nowhere near the resumption of reestablishing the full-scale work of their embassies or the appointment of ambassadors.

However, the discussion of bilateral issues may have not been the sole reason for Mr Rubin's visit. Usually US officials of his rank come to Minsk in winter or early spring as a part of their regional tour. This visit seems to be an unscheduled one. The top US diplomat may have wanted to hear first-hand about Belarus' position on Ukraine.

**Promoting Traditional Family Values**

The promotion of traditional family values has indeed become another key multilateral initiative of Belarus. However, unlike combating the trafficking of people, this idea
is failing to garner universal support.

In June, Belarusian diplomats brought up this subject during a UNICEF session and the UNGA high-level event on human rights and the rule of law. However, the idea has yet to find its way into the agreed documents of universal organisations.

Deputy Foreign Minister Valentin Rybakov had more success at the 17th Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Algeria. He managed to push the language about a traditional family in the final document of the meeting.

The Movement is composed of developing countries with mostly conservative social views. Belarus remains its only European member.