Belarus Engages Ukraine, Moldova, Improves Ties with EU and US – Foreign Policy Digest

The summer holidays proved to be productive for the relations of Belarus with both "old" and "new" Europe.

Foreign minister Vladimir Makei ended a continued pause in high-level contacts with Belarus' southern neighbour by an unconventional five-day long visit to Ukraine in mid-August. There, he took the risk of enraging Russia by meeting its mortal foe Mikheil Saakashvili in Odessa.

The EU Council significantly reduced its sanctions list against Belarus on 31 July and a US congressional delegation came to Minsk two days later. In exchange, Minsk agreed to discuss human rights with its Western partners, seemingly ending a long tradition of denial of any major problems in this sphere.

Will Minsk's diplomacy manage to continue befriending Russia's foes without alienating its main sponsor until right after the October presidential election?

Step-by-Step Cooperation with the West

On two separate occasions in July, the EU Council removed 26 persons and 4 companies from its Belarus' sanctions list. On 3 August, the Belarusian foreign ministry called this decision "a step in the right direction yet insufficient" and conditioned the normalisation of relations between Belarus and
the European Union by the full withdrawal of restrictions.

On 28 July in Brussels, Belarus and the EU held the first round of a human rights dialogue at the level of experts. Two months earlier, on 14 May, Belarus conducted similar consultations with the United States in Washington, DC.

On 2 – 4 August, a three-person US congressional delegation led by Dana Rohrabacher, the chairman of the subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and emerging threats visited Belarus. In Minsk, the congressmen met with President Lukashenka, deputy foreign minister Alexander Guryanov, and National Bank chairperson Paviel Kalavur. The parties discussed bilateral relations, human rights and democratisation issues, the state of the Belarusian economy, and regional security, including the crisis in Ukraine.

Belarus implements a step-by-step agreement with the West in the run-up to the election

These decisions and meetings hardly represented a chaotic chain of events. They manifest specific agreed steps in the step-by-step strategy adopted by Belarus and its Western partners in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election. In the near future, one should expect more similar events. The release of Mikalaj Statkievich, the most prominent political prisoner in Belarus, at which Lukashenka hinted during his interview to independent media outlets on 4 August, may become one of the key items in the list.

Ukraine: Trade, Peace-making or Both?

Belarusian foreign minister Vladimir Makei surprised many observers with his unusually long 5-day visit to Ukraine. Belarusian media provided scarce coverage to this trip, which took place on 12 – 16 August. The fact that public opinion in
Belarus predominantly sympathises with Russia in its conflict with Ukraine may explain this discretion.

In Kyiv, Vladimir Makei met with his counterpart Pavlo Klimkin and Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko. The parties claimed to have discussed a wide variety of issues, from cooperation in international organisations to joint projects between Belarusian and Ukrainian regions.

Two issues clearly dominated in the visitors' agenda: the conflict in southeast Ukraine and trade relations. The Belarusian minister seized the opportunity to re-emphasise Belarus' merits in the peace process. However, he took care to restrict the country's role to technical and logistic support for the negotiations, stressing that Belarus had no ambitions as a peacemaker.

Belarus unequivocally recognises Donetsk and Luhansk as an integral part of Ukraine.

Makei's insistence on the need of strong adherence of all parties in the conflict to the Minsk agreements served to avoid unduly worrying or alienating Russia. At the same time, answering a question from a Ukrainian journalist, he unequivocally recognised Donetsk and Luhansk regions as an integral part of Ukraine.

The visit's topmost priority was the trade relations between the two countries. In 2014, Ukraine was Belarus' second-biggest export destination. The war in Ukraine and the economic crisis in the region led to a 46.2% drop in Belarusian supplies to this country in the first half of 2015. Belarus has lost almost one billion dollars in export revenues in this single relationship.

Three weeks earlier, on 24 July, Belarus and Ukraine already discussed the alarming downfall in mutual trade at a meeting of the bilateral trade and economic cooperation commission in
Chernihiv, Ukraine. The two countries decided to draft "road maps" of cooperation in the spheres of manufacturing cooperation, energy, transports and logistics.

After Kyiv, Vladimir Makei travelled to Odessa where he met Mikheil Saakashvili, the governor of Odessa region and former president of Georgia. The official explanation for this encounter was Belarus' interest in expanding its use of the transit infrastructure of Ukraine's south seaports.

The peculiarity of this meeting is that Saakashvili remains one of the most hated personalities in Russia, in Belarus' closest ally. However, despite his strong pro-Western views, Saakashvili often supported Lukashenka in his contacts with influential Western leaders, as a token of gratitude for Belarus' refusal to recognise the breakaway Georgian regions.

**Eastern Partners Remain in Favour**

Despite the widely publicised strategy of opening new markets for its exports, Minsk still seeks to develop trade with its tried-and-tested partners. In May, Alexander Lukashenka visited Georgia. During the recent few weeks, besides sending his foreign minister to Ukraine, Belarusian president received his counterpart from Moldova, Nicolae Timofti, and Azerbaijani prime minister Artur Rasizade.

Belarus will assemble MAZ buses in Moldova

Lukashenka reaffirmed that Chisinau's policy of association with the EU would not hamper bilateral relations or entail any retaliation from Belarus. Two countries have decided to move from regular trade to manufacturing cooperation. The knockdown assembly of Belarusian tractors and trolleybuses has already become a success. The next project is to start assembling Belarusian MAZ buses in Moldova. In its turn, Moldova will open a winery in Belarus.
Alexander Lukashenka decorated Azerbaijani prime minister Artur Rasizade with the Order of Peoples' Friendship. These two political long-timers meet regularly to discuss economic relations between Minsk and Baku. As is the case with Moldova, Belarus prioritises cooperation in assembling Belarusian equipment in Azerbaijan.

Belarus has been persistent in strengthening cooperation with its Eastern Partnership neighbours despite the fact that most of them adopted the policy of estrangement from Russia. Minsk has thus been demonstrating its preference for pragmatic approach and emphasis on trade rather than geopolitics.