

On 18-19 July, Belarus officially welcomed a delegation from the European parliament along with the Latvian foreign minister, who spoke up for Belarus's policy of neutrality. These developments are signs that Belarus's rapprochement with the EU and other Western structures continues.

The annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk on 5-7 July was a milestone in this process. Indeed, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka commented that just three years ago he could not imagine a session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk.

The Belarusian government is finally reaping the rewards of its pursuit of [neutrality](#) between Russia and its opponents. Although this position has caused consternation in the Russian political establishment, Minsk has so far succeeded in minimising the damage.

## No more questions for Belarus?

In a recent interview with the Spanish daily *El Pais*, Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei announced that his country is now in 'a qualitatively different situation.' In particular, he noted: 'Our independence has been strengthened as a result of our efforts in developing relations ... [with our European](#) and North American partners.'



Thus, it seems that Belarusian leadership perceives the recent OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk as a success.

The Belarusian authorities wish to build on this triumph: at the event's opening meeting on 5 July, Lukashenka presented an ambitious idea for holding a major international conference aimed at achieving a *détente* between 'Euroatlantic' and '[Eurasian' countries](#) - promoting trust, security, and peace, a so-called 'Helsinki-2'.

Minsk also has several other achievements under its belt vis-à-vis relations with the EU and European structures. On 19 July, after meeting his Belarusian counterpart, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs announced that Riga no longer had any questions for Minsk concerning the forthcoming [West-2017](#) military exercise.

Rinkēvičs noted that while Latvia is a NATO member and Belarus is participating in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Riga 'is respecting the choice of [its] neighbours in the field of security.' At a press conference, Rinkēvičs agreed that Belarus-EU relations in recent years have become more rational and constructive.



Andrejs Mamikins. Image: euroradio.fm On 18 July in Minsk, for the first time in fourteen years, there was an official meeting between the deputies of the lower chamber of the Belarusian Parliament and members of the European Parliament (EP).

Andrejs Mamikins, an EP member who attended the meeting, described the discussions there as 'fierce' but 'completely friendly and sincere' on Facebook. The first time in recent years that an EP delegation came to Minsk was in June 2015, but this did not constitute an official meeting.

On the following day, the head of the EU delegation, Bogdan Zdrojewski, underlined that the meeting would not be considered official recognition for the Belarusian parliamentarians as 'democratically elected'. Nevertheless, he believes it necessary to resume dialogue with Belarus. Moreover, the EP is studying possible ways to invite Belarusian parliamentarians to Euronest Parliamentary Assembly events.

Dzyanis Melyantsou, a senior analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, commented that 'The Belarusian parliament is recognised by the EP. Security matters.'

## Ambiguous statements about Russia

Meanwhile, Belarusian government officials made ambiguous statements regarding relations with Russia. On 12 July, Lukashenka characterised the recent meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State of Belarus and Russia as unprecedentedly open, sincere, and fruitful. With regard to the prospects of the Union State, he added: 'To be honest, today there is no reason to be too optimistic. But after all [...] the process has started.'

The statement is remarkably not only because of the president's reservations regarding [Belarus-Russia integration](#). Lukashenka was quoting a well-known Russian phrase coined by Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, 'the process has started' [*protses poshol*]. Since Gorbachev used it to comment on developments which later turned out to be out of his control, the phrase in this context has an ironic undertone.

Speaking on 1 July at an official meeting dedicated to Independence Day, Lukashenka also stated that 'Not everything always goes smoothly in our relations with brotherly Russia.' Moments later, he went as far as to compare Belarusian-Russian relations with Belarus's [relations with China](#), saying, 'It's just luck that we have established such friendly relations with this great empire ... They are practically at the level of our relations with Russia.'

Belarusian Foreign Minister Makei made similar comments: in an interview with *El Pais*, he criticised the deployment of NATO troops in the region. However, he also mentioned how [Minsk refused](#) to host a Russian air base.

We are categorically against the deployment of a NATO contingent in the Baltic countries and Poland because this forces the other party to respond and contributes to an escalation... a new [Russian] foreign military base in Belarus does not make sense, because modern armaments allow Russia to react equally rapidly from its own territory.

## ‘A second Ukraine’

Minsk’s rapprochement with the EU and [Ukraine](#) and its ambiguous attitude towards Russia are causing a reaction in the pro-Kremlin Russian media. One article, entitled “The EU’s “Eastern Partnership” Threatens to Turn Belarus Into a “Second Ukraine,”” published on 9 July by Russia’s government-affiliated *Sputnik* media in English, is a case in point.

The author of this warning to Minsk was Vladimir Lepekhin, a former Russian politician turned political analyst. This is clearly more than his own personal opinion, as the text has been distributed by major Kremlin-affiliated media outlets worldwide. Before it was published by *Sputnik* in English, the article appeared in Russian on another Kremlin-affiliated website: the news agency *RIA Novosti*. This pedigree of the Lepekhin’s text made it another obvious black spot sent to Minsk.



Image:

mzv.czLepekhin urged Minsk to struggle against ‘the forces of globalism, which can be characterised as modern-day fascism ... For many years, Belarus had held out as being among the countries which were most resistant to these forces’ siren call.’

Among the projects pursued by these forces, according to the Russian commentator, is the EU Eastern Partnership programme. Lepekhin also voiced concern over Belarus’s

participation in the programme: 'The transformation of Minsk, following Kiev, into an instrument of anti-Russian forces - this is the real goal of the *Eastern Partnership*.'

Likewise, Moscow's steps in the security field show that the Kremlin puts little trust in its Belarusian ally. In his interview for *El Pais*, Belarusian foreign minister Makei complained that Russia and pro-Russian Donbas entities had also rejected Minsk's offer to deploy [Belarusian forces](#) to enforce control on the Russian-Ukrainian border.

In April, Russia also chose to promote an Armenian rather than a Belarusian as the new CSTO Secretary General, after it finally decided to replace Russian general Nikolay Bordyuzha. Bordyuzha had run this largely [symbolic organisation](#), dominated by Russia, since its establishment 14 years ago.

Thus, because of the changed security situation in the region, Minsk has adjusted its external relations to place more of an emphasis on neutrality. For the same reason, it has succeeded in improving its relations with Western and [regional countries](#). At the same time, the Belarusian government continued to assure the Kremlin of its [Russia-friendly policies](#).

Combining these policies is a difficult task, as the regular [outcries from Russia prove](#). Nevertheless, recent developments show that Minsk is already benefiting from this stance without encountering serious consequences. In other words, Belarus can continue to pursue [neutrality](#).

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