

Less Overt Support for Ukraine, Lukashenka Takes Pity on Putin – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Gunnar Wiegand, the top EU official for the CIS region, visited Minsk last week to continue active dialogue on modernisation. His unexpected avoidance of Belarus' titular opposition raised concerns in their ranks about a possible shift in policy in Brussels. Belarus continues its policy of manoeuvring between Russia and the West.

Senior diplomats from Belarus and Russia met in Minsk a day prior to Wiegand's visit to coordinate their respective foreign policies. Moscow has managed to secure Minsk's support in the ongoing and potential future geopolitical battles in exchange for some consular assistance.

Belarus also refrained lately from making bold statements in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity, focusing instead on peace and a rhetoric of holding negotiations.

Discussing Modernisation, Working on Normalisation

Belarus and EU member states are working patiently on finding a formula to normalise their bilateral relations. This month, Minsk and Brussels placed emphasis on developing their contacts in the institutional set-up of the [dialogue on modernisation](#) and the multilateral format of the Eastern Partnership.

On 18 and 19 November, Gunnar Wiegand, Director for Russia, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, Regional Cooperation and OSCE at the European External Action Service, visited Minsk.

The former chief EU negotiator of the association agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Armenia and Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) led the fourth EU-Belarus Interim Phase meeting on modernisation issues.

This visit focused on education, social reforms and regional development and included Gunnar Wiegand's meetings with civil society experts and analysts. The EU official also met with relatives of political prisoners. He brought up the issue of jailed political opponents in his talks with Alena Kupchyna and Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#).

Gunnar Wiegand's visit got a lot of attention in Belarusian independent mass media as some opposition leaders expressed their disappointment with the fact that the EU official failed to meet with them. In fact, nobody even told them about his visit in advance.

This decision to refrain from holding the traditional meetings with the titular opposition may be a signal to the Belarusian authorities. The EU is ready to strengthen cooperation with the government and civil society in non-political areas; the release of [political prisoners](#) remains, nevertheless, a condition *sine qua non* for normalisation of relations; the EU may be willing to de-emphasise its support to political opposition in Belarus in order to facilitate this process.

Eastern Partnership: Seeking Financing and Lobbying for Russia

The Eastern Partnership remains another convenient forum for normalising relations with the EU. While insisting on a [major reformation of this initiative](#), Belarus is participating in all of its working meetings.

On 5 November, Belarusian border guards and customs officials attended the EaP Integrated Border Management working group meeting in Brussels. The Belarusian and Ukrainian governments used this opportunity to solicit the EU for financial

assistance for demarcation of their joint border.

The next day, mid-level diplomats from the Eastern Partnership's participating countries and several EU member states met in Vilnius to discuss the further evolution of the EaP in preparation for the 2015 Riga summit. Dzianis Sidarenka, a Belarusian foreign ministry official, promoted the idea of using the EaP as a site for harmonising European and Eurasian integration processes.

Belarus and Russia: Coordinating Diplomacy to Serve Russia's Interests

Minsk and Moscow use every opportunity to lobby for its idea of "the integration of integrations". The Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei raised this issue while speaking to the press after a traditional joint session of senior officials from the Belarusian and Russian foreign ministries held in Minsk on 18 November. He called this idea "viable and a thing of the future" and dreamed of a "common economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok".

Vladimir Makei also advocated "[Russia's involvement in the \[EaP\] initiative](#)", especially through its participation in the implementation of mutually beneficial regional projects". This project was unrealistic even well before the Ukrainian crisis. Now, in view of the current developments, one can only wonder why the Belarusian MFA insists on pushing this rather utopian idea.

The agenda of the joint session mostly reflected Russia's geopolitical and ideological interests. Participants discussed how to strengthen "work with compatriots in third countries", whom Russian minister Sergei Lavrov bluntly classified as the "Russian World" in his opening statement at the meeting.

Senior diplomats from the two countries agreed on carrying out

coordinated activities to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II. Sergei Lavrov primarily sees this as a [celebration of the fight against neo-Nazism](#) in "neighbouring countries – Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine".

Russia has also actively sought Belarus' support in countering alleged security challenges and threats emanating from NATO and the European Union on the borders of the so-called "Union State", an oft forgotten institution which consists of Belarus and Russia.

The participants paid much less attention to issues which are at the centre of Belarusian foreign services attention these days, i.e. promoting Belarusian exports, opening new markets and attracting investment.

If Minsk agrees to be Moscow's pawn in its geopolitical game in Eastern Europe, it could seriously undermine Belarus' existing ties with its neighbours and nascent prospects of normalising relations with the EU.

Less Overt Support for Ukraine

During Sergei Lavrov's stay in Minsk, Belarus and Russia extensively discussed the situation in Ukraine. These talks unfolded as serious doubts emerged on the future of the [Minsk peace process](#).

Despite the fact that Belarus gained a lot in terms of international recognition and notoriety for its role in facilitating the negotiations, the Belarusian foreign ministry did not insist on a particular format of the peace talks or setting Minsk as their exclusive venue.

Recently, the Belarusian authorities refrained from making public statements, which would support the Ukrainian authorities or criticise Russia's actions. Dzmitry Mironchyk, the MFA's spokesman, avoided a journalist's question whether Belarus would recognise the results of the "elections" held

in the territories controlled by separatists. Only three weeks earlier, Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) unambiguously denied any possibility of recognising encroachments on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Vladimir Makei made a general statement of concern on 18 November saying, "At the present moment, in Ukraine the logic of war is trumping the logic of peace... when it comes to the death of not one but many people, you have to sit down and negotiate, be it with God or the devil".

The same day, during his meeting with Sergei Lavrov, Alexander Lukashenka sounded rather condescending when he took pity on Vladimir Putin because of the latter's "heavy schedule, especially in the east". He could not deny himself the pleasure of showing his self-satisfaction with his Russian colleague's recent embarrassing visit to Brisbane over Russia's actions in Ukraine.