

Sanctions, Peace Talks, Bologna Process: Is There Hope for Change?

After a second attempt, on 14 May Belarus joined the [Bologna process](#) and the group of 47 countries forming the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

While Belarus's acceptance into the Bologna process may open up prospects for long-term improvements in Belarusian education, there should not be any illusions about the full implementation of the Bologna principles or real political liberalisation in the country.

Minsk is utilising politically neutral spheres to improve his relationship with the West. EU officials should keep this in mind that after his 21 years in power, Lukashenka has continued to play off the EU and [Russia](#) for his own sake.

Between East and West

By all appearances, the situation looks as if it is a repeat of the scenario that unfolded before the presidential elections in 2010, when a brief period of warming up between Minsk and Brussels was later shattered by mass repression after the elections in December. Since that time, the relationship has deteriorated or been consistently poor, right up until the recent thaw that has gained traction following Minsk's hosting of peace talks.

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Taking sides for Lukashenka is not an easy task: too pro-West and he seems problematic for the Russian side. Too pro-Russian

and he appears as if he is ready to surrender Belarusian statehood to Russia. Nevertheless, Lukashenka has been playing the balancing game for a long time and is quite good at it.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless” and threatened to leave the Eurasian Union when Russia limited imports on certain Belarusian goods due to Russian sanctions against the EU. Lukashenka clearly understands the vulnerability of Belarusian economy due to its overwhelming dependence on the Russian market.

Lukashenka has shown his disdain for Russia's foreign policy by refusing to recognise Abkhazia and Ossetia or join in the Russian sanctions against Europe. However, this behaviour has resulted in gas, oil and food products problems for the Belarusian economy, a sign that Lukashenka's speeches can only go so far.

He is not willing to open up to Europe either. On February 16, he clearly declared in an interview with the state-run “Russia 1” TV channel: “If you think that’s the reason [for the peace talks], that I'm turning to someone – get that rot out of your head.”

A Thaw between the West and Belarusian Head of State

Belarusian media has called the Minsk peace talks over Ukraine a great diplomatic victory for Belarus and, personally, for Alexander Lukashenka. A visit by the French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave grounds for Belarusian authorities to say that Minsk is the capital of Eastern European diplomacy.

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It also demonstrated to the Belarusian opposition, in the wake of the presidential elections later this year, that the EU has

no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe in the near future.

[Hosting international talks](#) aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine has won Lukashenka some acclaim and served as an indicator of a thaw between the West and the Belarusian leader. The United States has lifted sanctions against Belarusneft, a state-owned Belarusian energy company, imposed in 2011 for its involvement in the Iranian petroleum sector.

Among other symptoms of the dialogue between EU and Belarus are an increase in the number of official visits to Europe by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei and the rumoured plans that Belarus might participate in the Riga summit “Eastern Partnership” at the presidential level. Lukashenka's participation would allow him to improve his own standing overall, including breaking through the West's wall of isolation that it has erected against Belarus.

One ex-presidential candidate in Belarus, Vitaly Rimasheusky, views the Summit as “a reflection of a new European policy – the resumption of relations with the Lukashenka regime, despite previous statements about the impossibility of having relations before the release of all political prisoners.”

Reality: the Bologna Process and Hockey

While the West has been overlooking the flaws of the Belarusian regime in the wake of the weak signals of liberalisation, Belarus has continued to play a balancing act between Russia and the West.

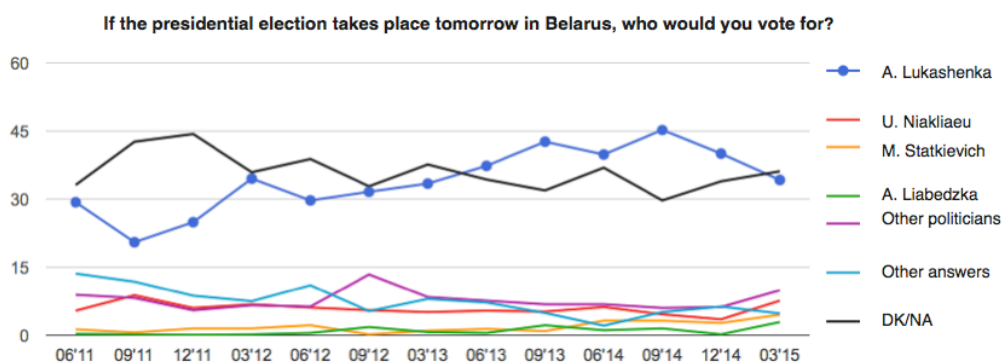
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By focusing on geopolitical factors, Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian

crisis, Belarus has taken a neutral stance and has improved relations with the West simply by providing a platform for negotiations. Belarusian officials continue to garner favour from the West by agreeing to implement minimal reforms in education.

The EU gave Belarus the go ahead to join the Bologna Process even though the educational system is still a crude mix of the old Soviet system and some external, neoliberal influences. The discourse of Belarusian authorities has not changed much since their last application to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2012 when the application was rejected. The geopolitical situation, however, was much more favourable this time around.

On the other hand, Minsk continues to respect its Eastern neighbour. After beating the United States for the first time (5-2) at the ice hockey world championship, Russia defeated the Belarusian hockey team 7-0 as a symbolic gesture for the 70th anniversary of Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It should be noted that a few days before that Russia lost to the United States 4-2.



Lukashenka's [fifth presidential election](#) will unlikely bring any surprises. Even though, according to IISEPS, Lukashenka's approval has been going down since September 2014, the Belarusian leader continues to enjoy more popular approval than any other potential political leader.

With the presidential election coming at the end of 2015,

Europe is counting on Lukashenka to deal with potential protests in a wiser manner. However, despite improving ties with the West, history has shown that the Belarusian leader will not hesitate to resort to severe measures to secure his position if it comes to it.