

# Belarus Approaches the EU Through 'Old Europe'

Just before German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande came for negotiations on Ukraine [to Minsk](#), Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei visited Germany.

The foreign minister's trip on 5-8 February was just one of numerous steps that the Belarusian government is taking recently to repair its relationship with the West.

This has had some success. Lukashenka's "role in the attempts to resolve the conflict in Ukraine made us to look in another way at the leader of Belarus," an official of the European External Action Service said.

Given the Belarusian geopolitical situation plus that its economy is so closely aligned with Russia only gradual evolution can lead to a successful rapprochement with the West. And this process may have been launched now as the Ukrainian crisis has made Minsk and the West look at each other in a different light.

## Reaching Out to Old Europe?

While in Munich, the minister told Belarusian ANT TV: "We do not see fundamental changes in relations ... Yet it is important that Europeans come incrementally to understand and positively perceive the peculiarities in relations with Belarus. ... Now we are going to activate the dialogue with the EU and US."

In Munich on 6-8 February, Makei met German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini,

the foreign minister of Italy among others.

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The Belarusian government always tried to establish more contacts with so-called 'Old Europe' (Western European countries like Germany, France or Italy), who are the main protagonists in the EU and shape its policies. Sometimes Minsk scored successes with such a strategy, when for example the Italian Prime Minister [Silvio Berlusconi](#) (the first Western European leader in the history of independent Belarus) came to Minsk in November 2009.

Since September the Belarusian authorities have demonstrates unprecedented activity in it's previously moribund relations with France. Against the backdrop of a series of official visits in recent months, Minsk finally managed to establish a joint commission on economic cooperation with Paris and sign an agreement on export insurance.

On 2 February, the sale of the first Peugeot cars assembled in Belarus started. At the same time, Accor (a French company), known for its global Ibis hotel network, plans to start construction three hotels in the three Belarusian cities of Hrodna, Brest and Barysau.

### **Russia Warns Belarus Against Rapprochement With US**

Minsk knows that it cannot [ignore the United States](#) in mending its fences with the EU. As early as the 22 September, the former Belarusian Prime Minister (Myasnikovich) met the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland in Washington.

Nuland is widely blamed by the Russian regime for the Ukrainian crisis, thus it is little wonder that when on 17 December she proclaimed US willingness to improve relations

with Belarus and spoke positively about Minsk's peace efforts, it was met with an immediate Russian response.

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A leading foreign policy expert of the Russian government, chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs Alexei Pushkov warned that by trying to befriend America Lukashenka might finally face the fate of Milosevich, Qadhafi and Hussein. He also dedicated a part of his [weekly programme](#) (27 December) on Russian TV to lash out at the Belarusian leader.

Nevertheless, at an extraordinary session of the Belarusian parliament on 15 January Lukashenka said that Belarus would strive to normalise relations with the West. On 30 January, speaking at a conference in Washington, Belarusian *chargé d'affaires* in the United States Pavel Shydłouski asked the United States to support Belarus at this time as the country's sovereignty and independence had come under threat.

### **Prospects For the Riga Summit**

All in all, the Belarusian relationship with the EU is starting to improve. Currently, Belarus and the European Union are negotiating the signing of agreements on lowering visa fees and [readmission](#) at the Riga summit.

However, several important questions remain unresolved. First, in visa negotiations Belarus (as usual for such agreements) wants to remove visas first for diplomatic passport holders. On the contrary, the European External Action Service insists on the requirement to ease visa restrictions first for ordinary citizens and not officials.

Secondly, a representative of the Latvian Foreign Ministry in late January said that his government hopes for the “highest level of Belarusian participation” in the [Eastern Partnership](#)

summit in Riga in late May. Minsk demands “equal terms,” meaning by that at least a nominal right to decide itself which Belarusian officials will attend the summit, and whether it might be Lukashenka.

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An official of European External Action Service told Euraradio on 2 February that the question of Belarusian representation at the summit remained unresolved. He added that it would be hard to reach an agreement on President Lukashenka's coming to Riga.

He explained, “the situation with political prisoners [...] will force us to suppress a lot within us before sitting down at a table with Lukashenka. And Lukashenka can easily send us an appropriate signal – to release all [political prisoners](#).” But the issue may have to be resolved by compromise.

Recently, Latvian Foreign Minister Andrejs Pildegovičs hinted at it as he repeatedly spoke about three political prisoners in Belarus. The figure remains contentious with different sides presenting different views of who should be deemed a political prisoner. Talking about three prisoners (and not six as some activists would like) Pildegovičs demonstrated a more moderate stance in hoping to reach a deal with Minsk.

Whether such a deal can lead to further rapprochement between the EU and Belarus depends on the patience and pragmatism of both the EU and the Belarusian side. After all, the Belarusian regime is not an ideological foe of Europe. President [Lukashenka talks](#) about Belarusians as a European nation, while Foreign Minister Makei proclaims his political hero to be Otto von Bismarck.

The conservative and pragmatic Bismarck presents a good

example for Belarusian politicians. For decades, he worked inside Germany and avoided unnecessarily antagonising external powers to unify the German nation. Likewise, only years of modernisation could change the Belarusian economy to reduce its dependence on external powers. Only taking account of the legitimate interests and sensitivities of external powers (Russia primarily) could Belarus secure success.

Although today many Belarus-Western contacts and visits concern the Ukrainian issue, Minsk, 'Old Europe' and the United States have started to look at each other pragmatically, managing to even put aside slogans, such as "the last European dictatorship" and the "aggressive NATO bloc." It may be the beginning of a new period of patient cooperation.

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## **Will Belarus Last for Long?**

The Crimean crisis stirred up a number of comments on the probability of Russian annexation of Belarus.

The topic is not completely new. Since the 1990s, fears of Russia taking over Belarus – under pretext of integration process – were one of main issues for national politics.

Later, the public's mood calmed down a bit as Lukashenka made clear that he did not intend to give away anything despite the authorities' integration declarations.

The survival of the Belarusian state today does not seem to be any more endangered than any other moment over the past two decades. Independent Belarus always suffered from a bad reputation and was expected to disappear from the face of the earth for years.

## Virtual Russian Annexation

Belarus appeared to be a complete unknown, and an exotic place, for many outsiders to believe in its permanence. The director of *Nasha Niva* weekly Andrei Dynko likes to recall how historian H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, now secretary of the Acad  mie Fran  aise, proposed in early 1990s to remove the then newly independent Belarus from the political world map – simply because such a state made no sense to her. The Academy itself discussed which gender to designate to Belarus in French.

Belarusian analysts also doubted the future of their country. Well-known political scientist Vyachaslau Paznyak in his 1998 article *Belarus: In Search of a Secure Identity* pronounced:

*More than any other of the former Soviet republics, Belarus was unprepared for the dissolution of the Soviet Union and remains uncertain about its status as an independent country and about its national identity.*

Belarus did not count on Western policies toward post-Soviet nations in early 1990s. The only major Western leader who ever visited the country was Bill Clinton, who came to Minsk for seven hours in 1994 – as a reward for Minsk's agreement not to maintain any claims on its Soviet nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, the president and executive director of Freedom House Adrian Karatnycky in his 1994 article "Another Chance for NATO" in the *National Review* argued that "Russia has virtually annexed Belarus by integrating the republic's economy and military into its own."

After the newly elected president Lukashenka launched a series of integration initiatives with Russia, it led to a new bout of negative perceptions of Belarus. Alexander Vondra, then deputy foreign minister, and later foreign minister and defence minister of the Czech Republic, argued in 1995 that,

"Already Belarus has not succeeded as an independent state. ... Belarus is a model of reintegration and of an increase in Russian influence in the Western direction at the smallest cost."

### **Brzezinski's Wisdom**

As Edward Lucas of *The Economist* commented later on,

*The idea that Belarusian statehood might be a temporary phenomenon gained ground. [...] it seemed inevitable to many that Mr. Lukashenko's strongly pro-Russian, pan-Slavic approach would end with the country becoming part of a new Kremlin-led confederation that in the future might include other pro-Russian anomalies such as Transdnistria [...] or the two separatist, Russian-backed enclaves in Georgia.*

Lucas included these ideas into his list of what the West got wrong about Belarus.

Dissenting opinions about Belarus as a political reality that would stick around remained almost unheard of until 2002-2003. Nevertheless, Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard* insisted that,

*Although Moscow managed to retain a politically dominant position in the formally newly independent but highly Russified Belarus, it was far from certain that the nationalist contagion would not eventually also gain the upper hand there as well.*

The experienced scholar and politician knew that the nationalism in Belarus might be simply misunderstood and it already emerged as being entrenched in some kind of specific state-focused form, unlike the nationalist movements in neighbouring countries with their focus on ethnicity and language.

Meanwhile, even a nationalistic Russian politician such as Alexei Pushkov at the end of 1998 warned in a publication of the Russian foreign ministry that:

*As far as Belarus is concerned, we shall develop the foundations of the existing union. It does not matter whether it is declaratory, still it is better than nothing. To unite? The Belarusian elite doesn't want to unite. Why would it be willing to lose the authority that it possesses? It will be drowned out in the Russian elite, it will be like a kind of Russian province – something like the Maritime Province. The elite will not give away their power. [...] Nobody ever gives away their power.*

### **Belarus as Cambodia under Pol Pot**

By the early 2000s the Belarusian regime became integrated into the global narrative of 'rogue' nations. First, Michael Kozak, the US ambassador to Belarus, described Belarus in an opposition newspaper in 2001 as 'the Cuba of Europe.' More odd speculations were yet to come.

In November 2002, the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank linked to the Bush administration, hosted a conference entitled, "Axis of Evil: Belarus-The Missing Link". Radek Sikorski insisted at the event that, "the message from this conference with Lukashenka is: 'President Lukashenka, be careful, because if your buddy in Baghdad gets thrown out, we will find the evidence of what you've been up to with him.'" Nothing substantial, however, has yet to be found.

Meanwhile, US senator John McCain has proclaimed, that "Thanks to Lukashenka's leadership, Belarus now joins a group of nations, including Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, that are both isolated in the modern community of nations and face a newfound American commitment to change the way they do business or go out of business."

To put Belarus alongside, say, Iraq became a handful of issues that are considered completely ordinary even in scholarly quarters, seems a bit extreme. Robert Rotberg did precisely this in his 2003 *Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators*. "There is a special category of weak state: the seemingly strong one, always an autocracy, which rigidly controls dissent and is secure but at the same time provides very few political goods." Among them he specifically named North Korea, "Cambodia under Pol Pot," Belarus, Iraq, and – with some doubts – Libya.

### **Doomsday Scenarios Replace Sound Debate**

Sound analysis of the situation surrounding Belarus remains a rare commodity in western and western-addressed discourse on Belarus and its regime. All respectable western monographs on Belarusian politics can be easily placed on one bookshelf. Gloomy forecasts, comparisons blown out of proportion and colourful rhetoric prevail. Discussions over Belarus' fate after the developments in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine exhibit much of the same pattern.

Ukrainian analogies dominate today's discussions and usually are followed by some grim predictions about an approaching doomsday for Belarus. The lending of Ukrainian concepts does not, in fact, make much sense because of the diametrically different political, economic and cultural developments that have occurred in Ukraine since 1991. Many analysts miss the completely incomparable strategic calculations involved in Belarus-Russian and Ukraine-Russian relations.

Belarusian statehood is stable despite the creeping degradation of some state and social institutions. Broad consensus support the value of Belarusian state. The nation displays no geographical cleavages comparable to those found in Ukraine, and there far fewer ethnic Russians – only 8.26% (according to a 2009 census, a number which is decreasing) – living dispersed amongst Belarusians and feeling rather secure

as on the absence of any hostility towards them.

The state apparatus in recent years has been informally reshuffled to ensure its loyalty to Belarusian statehood. Although the government articulates Russian-friendly rhetoric, everyone who goes too far with it gets punished.

Economically, the current modus vivendi with Russia, despite its regular trade wars, enables Minsk to monetise its friendship with Moscow and compensate for economic failures elsewhere. Russia, on the other hand, is aware that undermining Belarusian statehood comes with serious risks and does not offer any particularly grand prizes.

The Kremlin is striving to acquire profitable Belarusian factories through having them privatised by Russian oligarchs. Yet they do not seem to be interested in annexing thousands of square kilometres – land which is, in any event, already ruled by the government friendly to Russia.